



Canadian Breast Cancer Network
Réseau canadien du cancer du sein

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a black top. The background is a soft-focus bokeh of green foliage and warm, golden light, suggesting an outdoor setting at sunset or sunrise.

Breast Cancer

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

Relieving the emotional and physical toll of breast cancer through mind-body practices

Breast cancer treatment affects more than just your body. It can take an incredible toll on your emotional well-being as well. You likely have a ton of anxiety about your treatments, and how it will affect your life moving forward. If you're a mom, you've got to worry about how this will affect your kids and your family. A demanding job or the needed income is another added level of stress that can make a huge impact. Add all of this to the physical symptoms of treatment, like joint pain, it's an understatement to say that it's hard.

Mind-body practices are complementary therapies that can offer relief of some of the emotional and physical effects that cancer can have on a person. They use physical techniques to help connect your mind with your body. They can help you manage stress and anxiety and have been [known](#) to reduce pain or physical symptoms from cancer and treatment. Mind-body therapies can't (and shouldn't) replace your traditional treatments for your cancer, but they can certainly help improve your well-being and quality of life during and after treatment has ended.

We're breaking down some of the most common mind-body therapies used to complement cancer treatments.



Disclaimer: As always, we recommend speaking with your healthcare team about the risks and benefits of any complementary therapy before you start using them so that you get the most benefit with the least risk.

Yoga

The practice of yoga has deep roots in Indian culture dating back thousands of years. Traditional, authentic yoga is a way of life, incorporating spiritual and nutritional principles into daily life. Today, in Western society, yoga focuses mostly on a series of poses and breathing exercises. Studies have [shown](#) that yoga can have positive outcomes both physically and emotionally on cancer patients and survivors.

Benefits: It can reduce anxiety, depression and make you feel more relaxed. It can also improve your strength and mobility helping joint pain and can be a good source of regular exercise.

Risks: If you have bone metastases, some poses, and more rigorous forms of yoga may be more harmful than good as it could cause fractures. Some forms of yoga, like hot yoga, should also be avoided if you have lymphedema or are at risk of developing lymphedema. Whether you are regularly active or not, knowing your limits while practicing yoga is key for getting the most out of this mind-body therapy. The great thing about yoga is that your instructor can show you how to modify most poses to ensure you don't overdo it.

Touch Therapies

Reiki and Therapeutic Touch are forms of mind-body therapies that focus on balancing a person's energy through the hands. In Reiki, a form of Japanese medicine, a practitioner will place their hands either just above or gently on the body in a series of positions for a few minutes at a time. Therapeutic Touch is a modern form of touch therapy

where practitioners use sweeping hand motions on or just above the body.

Benefits: Those who use touch therapy say that it can have deep relaxation [benefits](#) and reduce stress or anxiety. Others say it can help reduce pain, improve sleep and [ease muscle tension](#). In essence, touch therapy is said to help improve a person's overall well-being.

Risks: Touch therapy is generally safe for people living with cancer and shouldn't interfere with your regular treatments. Sometimes people may feel headaches or tiredness after sessions.

Meditation

There are many different forms of meditation, and many of the complementary therapies we talk about incorporate meditation in some form. But the overall premise of meditation is to calm and clear your mind of external stressors and focus entirely on your present state of being. It can be done through breathing exercises, focusing on specific objects or focusing on a word or phrase. It can be associated with prayer or movement like yoga.

Benefits: Meditation is generally known to help relieve you of physical and mental stress and improve your overall well-being. For breast cancer patients, it's been [shown](#) to help manage many symptoms and side effects and reduce the fear of recurrence. It can help with insomnia, high blood pressure, and nausea.

Risks: Meditation should have no harmful effects and shouldn't interfere with regular treatment. Meditation could have similar risks as yoga if you're practicing through movement. It could also have negative effects if you are vulnerable to or suffer from any depressive mental illnesses.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy puts a person into a trance-like state of deep relaxation while leaving the mind active and responsive. You often hear hypnosis used for treating traumatic events or to overcome fears, but it can also be used to help reduce and cope with the many side effects of cancer and treatment. It can block out external distractions and provide clarity to thoughts or feelings that a person may naturally try to avoid when conscious.

Benefits: It can **reduce** pain, nausea, anxiety, insomnia or fatigue. It can also help people feel more control over situations in which they have no control, like cancer.

Risks: There is a lot we still don't know about hypnotherapy but if you use a qualified hypnotherapist it should be safe. This form of therapy should not be used if you suffer from psychosis or seizures.

Generally, complementary therapies are not covered by the public healthcare system, so you may have to pay out of pocket. Some private insurance plans may cover some of these so be sure to check with your provider.

Overall, mind-body therapies are natural holistic ways to reduce stress and anxiety that lead to a general improvement in a person's well-being. The added potential benefits of relieving physical pain, insomnia or fatigue will also improve your quality of life.

Guided meditation at home

In the last article, we discussed mind-body therapies to help relieve some of the emotional and physical side effects of cancer and treatment. In this article, we are sharing some guided meditations you can do in the comfort of your home.

Here are 3 guided meditation exercises worth trying to help reduce stress and anxiety.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's Body Scan

Jon Kabat-Zinn is a Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and a renowned meditation instructor. His research includes using mindfulness-based stress reduction for people with chronic pain, stress-related disorders, women with breast cancer and men with prostate cancer.

The **body scan meditation** guides your attention through breathing exercises to different parts and feelings within your body. It begins by focusing on your toes, then on the bottom of your foot, slowly moving to different areas of your body. He asks you to acknowledge any sensation you may be feeling in that area, including pain.

Guided Meditation for Sleep

If you're having trouble falling asleep **this meditation** may help you focus your thoughts and allow your mind to rest and let go. Start by focusing on your breath and if your mind wanders to what you have to do tomorrow, recognize it, let it go and come back to your breathing. When the audio ends, it does not give you a bell or any kind of warning to help ease you better into sleep.

Walking Meditation

Another meditation from Jon Kabat-Zinn, **this walking meditation** is similar to the previous meditations except that you walk while practicing. It uses the motion of walking to help guide the practice of mindfulness meditation. Find a place where you will not be distracted or disrupted. It doesn't have to be very large as you can just walk back and forth.



Physical therapy vs. Occupational therapy: What's the difference?

Rehabilitation is an important aspect when recovering from or living well with breast cancer. Physical therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) are terms we often hear when discussing rehabilitation, but we can sometimes confuse their true meanings.

Being treated with surgery, radiation or chemo can take a huge toll on a person's body. Surgery can put you at risk for lymphedema, your skin can develop scar tissue from radiation, and chemo just knocks the stuffing out of you while often causing signs of brain fog. Both PT and OT can go a long way in improving these side effects of treatment while also helping to regain a better sense of self and well-being. We're breaking down these therapies, what their differences and similarities are and how they can help you improve your quality of life.

Physical Therapy

The purpose of physical therapy is quite straight forward. According to the [World Confederation for Physical Therapy](#), "Physical therapists provide services that develop, maintain and restore people's maximum movement and functional ability." Simply put, they focus on improving you physically.

For people living with breast cancer, surgery and radiation can make a significant impact on your body. For people living with metastatic breast cancer, the cancer itself can also sometimes be the cause of your pain and mobility issues. PT can help improve all these side effects through different techniques.

Stretching: This is a great way to improve range of motion and can help to prevent signs of lymphedema. By starting slow with gentle stretching, you can begin to feel more mobility and less pain.

Exercises: If you're worried about developing lymphedema, just looking to improve your range of motion from surgery or if your mBC is affecting other areas of your body, strength training exercises may be a helpful next step.

A physical therapist specializing in oncology can teach you different stretching techniques and exercises that you can do daily from your home and can also accommodate your limits so that you don't overdo it and cause more damage.

Massage: This is another common form of physical therapy but can be done on its own as it has so many positive benefits. Not only can it help with range of motion and an improvement of lymphatic drainage, it can simply be relaxing, depending on the type of massage you're receiving. But it is important to find a physical therapist or massage therapist trained in treating cancer or lymphedema.

Occupational Therapy


While PT focuses on the physical self, OT focuses on the whole body. According to the [Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists](#), occupational therapy is a "type of health care that helps to solve the problems that interfere with a person's ability to do the things that are important to them".

Occupational therapists trained in oncology are able to help with physical things like balance and coordination. But their abilities reach far beyond the physical limitations you may be experiencing:

- They can teach you techniques to improve your memory or help you adapt your lifestyle to accommodate your cognitive foggyiness.
- They can show you simple daily lifestyle changes to improve your lymphedema, neuropathy or other common side effects of cancer. These changes may include things like skin care management, how to prevent infections, and how to adapt your clothing to fit your needs.
- They can give you tips on conserving and improving your energy if the effects of chemo or other systemic therapies are taking their toll.
- They can also help you develop coping strategies if you're experiencing symptoms of stress or anxiety.

Overall, the goal of OT is to improve or make suitable accommodations for all aspects of your life if the cancer and treatment is making a significant impact on more than just your body.

The benefits of both OT and PT can be far reaching and can lead to a much better quality of life. Reach out to your oncology team to see if there are therapists in your community trained in treating cancer's side effects. There may be costs associated with these therapists so check your private insurance coverage if you have it to see what can be covered. You can also ask your oncology team if there are any community groups that offer wellness services.



Tai Chi vs Qigong: What's the difference?

Tai chi and qigong have long been popular in the cancer community to help with the effects of the disease. In this article, we look at these two forms of Chinese therapy, their similarities, differences and benefits.

Both tai chi and qigong are components of traditional Chinese medicine. They use slow movements, focused breathing and meditation to ensure that your chi is free to flow easily throughout your body. "Chi" simply means breath and is believed to be the energy flowing through your body. Tai Chi is actually a form of Qigong, so the movements are similar in that they are slow and flowing but the focus, methods and benefits can differ between the two.

In origin, tai chi is a form of marital art. Growing in popularity, it has evolved into a low impact and gentle form of exercise. The movements, also known as forms, of tai chi focus on standing positions and tend to be more complex than qigong. The flow of the movements are done in a specific pattern or order to help focus on the whole body as opposed to specific areas of the body.¹

Qigong's primary focus is and has always been on health and wellness. While tai chi focuses mostly on standing movements, qigong can also incorporate more lying or sitting down postures and the movements can be simpler in form than tai chi. This may be more beneficial to people who have specific injuries or limitations as they can be modified to fit your needs. The focus of qigong also differs from tai chi. Instead of focusing on chi throughout the whole body, qigong focuses on specific aspects of chi within the body.¹

Both methods of traditional Chinese therapy have been shown to have positive benefits for breast cancer patients. While neither have been shown to treat or prevent cancer, they can help relieve your side effects of the disease and its treatment. Tai chi can help with balance, flexibility and strength;² while both have also been shown to lower blood pressure, reduce stress, and ease pain and stiffness.^{3,4}

This study showed that tai chi can also help treat insomnia in breast cancer patients. 30% of breast cancer patients experience insomnia at some point in their treatment and tai chi offers an affordable alternative to cognitive behavioral therapy. Treating insomnia can also lower risks of depression.

Qigong has also been shown to reduce signs of depression and improve overall quality of life in breast cancer patients.

While both forms of this traditional Chinese medicine can greatly improve your quality of life during and after your cancer treatment, it's always important to talk with your oncologist before starting any new therapy or exercise.



Art and Music Therapy – how they can help you reduce stress and provide emotional support

When people think of therapy the most common therapy session that comes to mind probably includes a person sitting across from or lying down beside a therapist and talking about their feelings. But what if you can never quite find the right words to say to express yourself or talking through what you are feeling doesn't seem to be helping? The truth is therapy comes in all shapes and sizes. People are looking for and creating new ways to help cope with the stresses in their lives.

For breast cancer, more and more people are finding that art and music can be healing and effective ways to cope with their diagnosis and reduce the stress that comes with it.

What is art therapy and how do I do it?

Art therapy can be an [effective way](#) to treat anxiety, depression and fatigue, three common side effects of breast cancer treatment. It can allow you to express your feelings without having to talk it out with a stranger. It can also be a much more affordable form of therapy if you lack private insurance coverage for traditional therapy.

Therapy can be expressed through different types of art. You can choose to draw, paint, or work with clay – whatever medium feels most comfortable and natural for you. [People may find](#) that working with their hands is more relaxing and because you are not obligated to explain yourself, it can build self-esteem and self-exploration. The best thing is, you don't

need to consider yourself a creative or artistic person to benefit from art therapy!

To learn more about art therapy and to find a therapist in your community, visit the [Canadian Art Therapy Association](#).

What about music therapy?

Similar to art therapy, music therapy offers an alternative way to connect with your emotions and help improve your quality of life after a breast cancer diagnosis. It has also been [known](#) to help manage pain symptoms.

Also, like art therapy, you don't need to have any skills playing instruments or creating music. Music therapy can take on many different [forms](#) including listening to music, playing music, songwriting, or singing. Music therapy can be done in a group or private setting.

To learn more about the benefits of music therapy and to find a therapist near you visit the [Canadian Association of Music Therapists](#).

It's important to remember that you do not have to have any artistic or musical skills to benefit from these forms of therapy. Simply the act of participating and allowing yourself to express your inner thoughts in an alternative way can benefit you more than you know.



Using acupuncture for treating cancer treatment side effects

Like tai chi and qigong, acupuncture is another form of traditional Chinese medicine that has become a popular therapy used in the cancer community for help with side effects.

What is it?

Acupuncture uses very thin needles inserted in specific areas of the body to help balance a person's [chi](#). It has been used for centuries to promote health and wellness and traditionally it was thought that the needles balance energy flow along meridians, or pathways, throughout the body. In modern medicine, acupuncture is actually shown to "stimulate nerves, muscles and connective tissue."¹

How does it work?

Thin stainless-steel needles are inserted just below the skin. They are not inserted very deep, but some people can feel a slight pinch when they are inserted. During treatment, you should likely feel very little sensation from the needles if you keep yourself still and relaxed. A single session can last anywhere from 10 minutes to half an hour. After your first session you may feel disoriented and there may be a short-term increase in your symptoms. These side effects will dissipate, and your symptoms will begin to improve.

It's important to discuss your condition, medications including vitamins or supplements and any cancer related side effects that you may be experiencing so that the practitioner can

adjust your treatment based on your needs.

How can it help?

Most commonly, acupuncture has been found to help alleviate nausea and vomiting as well as pain caused by the cancer itself or cancer treatment.² It has also shown to help with other side effects of cancer including:

- Fatigue
- Chemotherapy induced neuropathy
- Depression or anxiety
- Hot flashes
- Insomnia

It has even been shown to possibly improve quality of life in palliative care.³

As always, speak first with your oncology team about the possibility of beginning acupuncture treatment for your side effect management.

Where to find an acupuncturist

When looking for a qualified acupuncture therapist, it is important to find someone who specializes in treating cancer patients. The Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Association of Canada [outlines](#) what makes a person a qualified acupuncturist and provides a [database](#) for finding a practitioner in your area.



Indigenous traditional healing

What is it?

Indigenous Traditional Healing is a holistic practice that aims to treat imbalances in a person's body, mind, emotions, and spirit together. These imbalances are thought to be the cause of illness and to result from ignoring sacred, natural laws. Tradition healing practices are distinct and culturally specific to the people who are practicing them. In Canada, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis view health as a balance of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. These four elements can be impacted by the individual, their family, their community and the environment. For example, connection to the land is an important aspect of healing for the Inuit. Being out on the land and away from one's community can bring calmness to the body and mind by removing outside influences and in turn promote personal well-being.

Below, we highlight some of the more popular Indigenous Traditional Healing practices. It is important to note that though these are practiced by many, not all Indigenous groups engage in all these traditions.

Healing circles are convened to discuss a problem or question. Members sit in a circle, and the leader, facilitator, or elder opens with a prayer. A talking stick is passed around the circle; only the person holding the stick can speak. The healing circle concludes when the talking stick has passed one time around the circle without anyone being interrupted. For cancer patients and their caregivers, the healing circle is a place to pour out their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and get support and healing.

Sweat lodges are dome-shaped structures used for purification and healing rites. Inside, stones are heated on a fire and water is poured on the stones to create steam. This steam helps ceremony

participants sweat out toxins and impurities and is thus thought to promote healing.

Smudging is a ceremony to cleanse a person or place of negative thoughts and feelings, to purify the soul, and to bring clarity to the mind. In a shell or small container, the four sacred plants (sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco) are ignited. The flames are blown out and the resulting smoke is wafted around a person or place with a hand or eagle feather. After the ceremony, the ashes are disposed of on the bare soil. These ashes are thought to contain the negative thoughts and feelings.

Indigenous teachings are summarized by the [Medicine Wheel](#), a circle that represents the cycles of life. It is divided into four quadrants, each with a different colour, to represent the four seasons, four directions, four sacred animals, four sacred plants, and other elements of importance in people's lives. Traditional healing can also be based on the season as the seasons can influence the practices being done. In addition to these ceremonies, various Indigenous healers use plants, trees, herbs, soils, food, and water from the land around them.

How can it help?

Indigenous Traditional Healing has not been shown to cure cancer, but it can provide psychological, emotional, and spiritual support to cancer patients and their families which can help with stress, anxiety, and depression. It's important to tell your primary care team if you use these or any other Indigenous Traditional Healing, especially if you are using plants or herbs that may interact with conventional therapies.

How do I find a group or practitioner?

Some hospitals and cancer centres have Aboriginal/Indigenous health care patient navigators that you can speak to if you are interested in using traditional healing

as a complementary therapy. We also provide you with a few resources below to get you started:

National

- [Inuusinni Aqqusaaqtara – Cancer Resources for Inuit](#)
- [Cancer Healing Circle Guide for Inuit](#)
- [The Inuit Way](#)

Alberta

- [Indigenous Cancer Patient Navigator Program](#)

British Columbia

- [Aboriginal Patient Liaison/Navigator Contact List](#)
- *Living with Cancer*, [Métis edition](#) and [First Nations edition](#)
- Prince George: [BC Cancer Agency Centre for the North](#)

Manitoba

- [Winnipeg Regional Health Authority Indigenous Health](#)
- [CancerCare Manitoba First Nations Patient Guide](#)

Newfoundland

- Eastern Health [Aboriginal Patient Navigator Program](#)

Nunavut

- [Interviewing Inuit Elders: Perspectives on Traditional Health](#)
- [Iisaqsivik](#) - Mental Health and Counselling Program

Ontario

- [Indigenous Navigators](#)
- Hamilton: Juravinski Cancer Centre [Aboriginal Patient Navigator](#)
- Kingston: Cancer Centre of Southeastern Ontario

[Aboriginal Patient Navigator](#)

- Oshawa: Durham Regional Cancer Centre [Aboriginal Patient Navigator](#)
- Ottawa: The Ottawa Hospital [Champlain Indigenous Cancer Program](#)
- Sudbury: Northeast Cancer Centre [Aboriginal Patient Navigator](#)
- Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre [Indigenous Patient Navigator, Regional Cancer Care](#)
- Toronto Central Regional Cancer Program [Indigenous Patient Navigation Specialist](#)
- Windsor Regional Cancer Centre [Aboriginal/Indigenous Navigator](#)

Saskatchewan

- [First Nations and Métis Health Service](#)

Yukon

- [Yukon Hospitals First Nations Health Cultural Programs](#)



Order Our Resources

Finding reliable information on breast cancer can be overwhelming. We have produced various reports to help you understand your breast cancer diagnosis better. These resources are available online or in print.

Order our resources today!



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