Patient Information: Replacing Conventional Medicine with Complementary Therapy Can Decrease Survival

A recent study from Yale Cancer Center published in the American Medical Association’s *JAMA Oncology* compared complementary and alternative medicine use by cancer patients and its impact on survival and treatment adherence. The researchers studied 1,290 patients with breast, prostate, lung, or colorectal cancer in the National Cancer Database, which includes de-identified information on approximately 70% of newly diagnosed cancers nationwide, and compared 258 patients who used complementary medicine to 1,032 who did not.

By collecting the outcome information of the 258 patients who received complementary medicine in addition to conventional cancer treatments, the researchers found that despite having received conventional cancer therapy, these patients were more likely to refuse other aspects of recommended care like chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, and/or hormone therapy. The researchers concluded that patients who chose to use complementary or alternative medicines during cancer treatment, were more likely to refuse recommended conventional cancer treatments. They also found that this refusal of recommended cancer treatments was associated with a higher risk of death, compared to those who used no complementary or alternative medicines.

Smilow Cancer Hospital believes these research findings are important for patients considering complementary or alternative medicines, including our own patients who seek consultations or complementary services through our Integrative Medicine Program. The study involved complementary medicines as treatment for the cancer itself – rather than the use of complementary medicine to address symptoms of cancer or side effects of treatment. The study highlights the potential risks involved with use of complementary medicine - if patients use complementary medicine and then choose to forego their recommended cancer treatment.
Smilow Cancer Hospital’s Integrative Medicine Program focuses on alleviation of symptoms related to cancer treatment and collaboration with our healthcare teams to ensure adherence to recommended treatment plans. We hope our patients will continue to access the services offered in Integrative Medicine, but that the information learned through this study will ensure continued, active communication with each patient’s healthcare team to maintain treatment schedules. Timely adherence to all recommended conventional therapies is strongly advised.