

Oral presentation

Use of herbs and supplements by chemotherapy patients attending an integrative cancer clinic

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Introduction. The Block Center for Integrative Cancer Treatment is a community based medical center that offers cancer chemotherapy in a setting of integrative medicine, including dietary counseling, use of selected herbs and other supplements, physical care modalities such as massage and yoga, fitness training, support groups and psychological care. Cancer patients attend the clinic with the expectation that they will receive integrative care. Since greater numbers of patients with cancer and other chronic diseases now seek out integrative treatment, it is important to characterize this group of patients, especially with regard to use of supplements that if used without expert supervision could lead to drug interactions.

Objectives. The objective of this study was to determine the use of herbs, supplements and conventional medications by chemotherapy patients at the time of their initial visit to the Block Center, before receiving counseling or treatment from the Center staff. The demographics, disease types and cancer stages of the patients were also assessed.

Methods. Supplement and medication use was recorded from intake questionnaires, and checked against intake interviews in medical records. Disease type, stage and patient age and sex were obtained from medical records. Records of 69 patients recruited from 2004 to 2007 were included in the study.

Results. Average age of the patients was 50 years. 47 patients were female. The predominant diagnoses were breast cancer (28 patients) and colon cancer (15 patients). 35 of the patients had stage 4 disease. Patients took an average of 5.3 herbs/supplements (range 0-29) and 2.4 conventional medications (range 0-11). 20 patients reported using no supplements, and 20 reported using no medications. Major types of herbs and supplements taken, and potential supplement-drug interactions will be discussed.

Conclusion. Patients seeking integrative cancer treatment have a high incidence of advanced cancers and many take large numbers of supplements. Predominant supplements taken included vitamins C and E, coenzyme Q10 and garlic. Based on the lists of supplements reported by these patients, none were observed to be at risk for major herb-drug interactions likely to cause immediate serious clinical problems, although instances of potential problems requiring counseling were observed.

Keywords: complementary and alternative medicine, warfarin, vitamins, garlic, stage 4 cancer

Selected References

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