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Homeopathy in cancer patients - a systematic review of randomized controlled trials

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Homeopathy in cancer patients - a systematic review of randomized controlled trials -

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BACKGROUND

Homeopathic treatment is often used by cancer patients in many countries, especially in Europe, Asia, and South America.

In general, prospective observational studies and case-series on different, not cancer-related indications show positive results for various homeopathic therapies.

The available randomized controlled trials and their results were judged very controversially in systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Concerning the treatment of cancer patients only very few studies have been conducted up to now. They are presented and discussed here.



METHODS

Search Strategy: We searched the Cochrane Library, MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL and web of science. We handsearched reference lists of reviews and included articles.

Selection criteria: Randomized controlled trials on homeopathy in cancer patients.

Data collection and analysis: Two authors independently selected potentially relevant studies, decided upon their inclusion and extracted data on participant characteristics and interventions of included studies.

RESULTS

Homeopathy in the treatment of radiodermatitis

[Hoffman A et al., *International Journal of Homeopathic Practice* 2006; 17(2):21]

- N = 82 patients with various cancers under radiotherapy
- 3 parallel groups: - Cobaltum C 30 (n = 28)
- Causticum C 30 (n = 26)
- placebo (n = 28)
- Outcome: radiation reaction score (0 – 18)
- Results: - Cobaltum: 4.7
- Causticum: 5.4
- placebo: 8.5

Radiodermatitis in breast cancer patients

[Belladonna A et al., *British Homeopathic Journal* 2006; 81(1):11]

- N = 61 breast cancer patients under radiotherapy
- 2 parallel groups: - Belladonna C7 and X-ray C15 (n = 29)
- Placebo (n = 28)
- Outcomes: - heat, erythema, hyperpigmentation, edema
- sum score
- Results: - sum score during radiotherapy: positive trend
- sum score after radiotherapy: sign. better (p < 0.05)

Prevention of radiodermatitis in breast cancer patients

[Pfeiffer F et al., *J Clin Oncol* 2004; 22:1441-1448]

- N = 254 breast cancer patients under postoperative radiotherapy
- 2 parallel groups: - Calendula off. mother tincture ointment
- Troilamine ointment
- Outcome: RTOG acute skin toxicity scale (grade ≥ 2)
- Results: - toxicity > 2: - Calendula: 41%
- control: 63% (p ≤ 0.001)
- radiatio interruption due to toxicity
- Calendula: n = 1 (1%)
- control: n = 12 (9%)

Menopausal symptoms in breast cancer survivors

[Thompson J et al., *J Altern Complement Medicine* 2005; 11:11-20]

- N = 53 breast cancer patients with ≥ 3 hot flashes daily
- Intervention: classical (constitutional) homeopathy vs placebo
- Outcomes: - MYMOP (Measure Yourself Medical Outcome Profile)
- Menopausal Symptom Questionnaire
- EORTC QLQ-C30, HADS
- Results: - clinically relevant improvement in both groups without statistically significant differences

Homeopathy for chemotherapy induced nausea /vomiting

[Hoffman A et al., *Journal of Homeopathic Practice* 2004; 15(1):10-14]

- N = 55 breast cancer patients with CHT induced nausea (CMP)
- 2 parallel groups: - homeopathic combination remedy (n = 30)
- placebo (n = 25)
in addition to their conventional antiemetics
- Outcome: - the need of additional conventional antiemetics
- Results: no sign. differences between groups

Homeopathy for chemotherapy induced stomatitis in children undergoing stem cell transplantation

[Wolfsheim M et al., *Cancer* 2002; 93:400-405]

- N = 30 patients undergoing stem cell transplantation (3-25 years)
- 2 parallel groups: - 5 x daily homeopathic combination (n = 15)
- 5 x daily placebo (n = 15) as a mouth rinse
- Outcome: WHO - Stomatitis-Score (AUC)
- Results: AUC: 10.4 (homeopathy) vs. 24.3 (placebo) [p < 0.01]

Menopausal symptoms in breast cancer survivors

[Hoffman A et al., *J Altern Complement Medicine* 2005; 11:21-27]

- N = 83 breast cancer patients with ≥ 3 hot flashes daily
- 3 parallel groups: - classical homeopathy (n = 26)
- homeopathic combination remedy (n = 30)
- placebo (n = 27)
- Outcomes: - hot flashes frequency
- Kupperman Menopausal Index (KMI)
- SF-36 QoL Score
- Results: - hot flashes frequency: no sign. differences
- SF 36: sign. increased in both homeopathy groups after one year

Homeopathy for chemotherapy induced nausea /vomiting

[Bou-Coutinho L et al., *J Clin Oncol* 2006; ASCO Annual Meeting Proceedings (Abstract)

- N = 43 breast cancer patients with CHT induced nausea
- 2 parallel groups: - homeopathic combination remedy (n = 21.4)
- placebo (n = 21.7)
in addition to their conventional antiemetics
- Outcome: - FLIE (Functional Living Index for Emesis)
- Results: no sign. differences between groups
(but lower nausea / vomiting rates than usual in both groups)

Homeopathy for chemotherapy induced stomatitis in children undergoing stem cell transplantation

[Pfeiffer M et al., *Phytother Res* 2005; 19(12):1003-1007]

- N = 190 patients undergoing stem cell transplantation
- 2 parallel groups: - 5 x daily homeopathic combination
- 5 x daily placebo, both as a mouth rinse
- Outcome: Walsh mucositis scale (AUC)
- Results: no significant differences between groups

SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS

Antitumour Effects: There are few preclinical studies showing cytostatic activity of homeopathic remedies, but no controlled clinical trials proving antitumour effects of homeopathic treatment have been published until today.

Effects on side effects and on quality of life: We found n = 9 randomized placebo controlled trials. Some studies show positive effects of homeopathic medications on side effects of conventional therapies (e.g. radiation or chemotherapy) as well as on quality of life, but these results are preliminary and need further replication in methodically adjusted and meaningful follow-up studies.

Homeopathy may be effective against radiotherapy-induced dermatitis. There was no therapeutic effect of homeopathic combination remedies on chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting. There was nearly no effect of homeopathic treatment on menopausal symptoms in breast cancer patients, but studies were small and probably underpowered. Studies on the effect against chemotherapy-induced stomatitis have conflicting results.

Tolerability: No serious adverse effects and no interactions with conventional therapies were described in the studies published up to now.

Conclusion: While most observational studies on homeopathy in general medicine show beneficial effects, the few randomized controlled trials in cancer patients have shown conflicting results. The great demand for homeopathic treatment in cancer patients calls for further research.