

Cancer: Prevention and Rehabilitation through Yoga

Cancer is one of the leading causes of death worldwide, with an incidence of 14 million new cases per year, with about 1 million diagnosed in India. The prevalence of cancer has increased over the past decade and is expected to rise by 8% in the next 5 years. Regular screening, early detection, and improved therapies have increased the 10-year survival from 61% to 77% in the past decade. However, advancements in cancer treatment have not changed mortality rates.

While cancer prevention is being debated and developed in many health-care facilities, there is no doubt a strong component is in following some basic lifestyle modifications.

Cancer cells are not powerful invaders as viruses from outside. They are born in our own bodies, say a thousand in a billion cells which are created every day in our bodies. However, our immune system takes care of them recognizing them as enemies as it does with outside germs. It is well known that stress is an immune suppression factor and highly stressed lifestyle can bring confusion in the immune system to recognize cancer as an enemy. On the contrary, it thinks that they are good friends and does not destroy them. This aspect is known as Viparyaya, a state of mind in which reality is perceived wrongly (an example of perceiving a rope as snake or a post as ghost). Unless this Viparyaya is corrected, the root cause of cancer will not be vanquished. This is possible by de-stressing mind-body through the practice of relaxation techniques such as asanas, breath slowing Pranayama, and mind-calming meditation methods. Furthermore, proper diet, exercise, avoiding smoking, use of tobacco in various forms, psychedelic drug addictions, and uncontrolled consumption of alcohol surely will help in the prevention of cancer. This is where the role of Yoga practices take importance. It is said in the Gita that he who eats sparingly, who sleeps just adequately and who is skillful in action, for such a person Yoga becomes a “killer of dukkha (distress or misery)” (Bhagavad Gita 6:17).^[1] A positive attitude in work arena and to act stress-free is an important factor in maintaining high level of immunity. We know, for example, many students report sick during examination time. This is because of the stress that is experienced by them and their inappropriate response to stress.

It is presently recommended that overeating and eating too often in a day could be causes of reduced immunity. There are a few individuals who eat only twice a day and skip all solid foods 1 day a month. Cancer cells are known to proliferate deriving energy from the food we eat; by skipping solid foods once a month, we could arrest the proliferation and even eliminate production of

cancerous cells. More work is needed to substantiate these statements; however, there is some basic understanding of cancer cell activity which is important in cancer prevention.

We at Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana have developed yoga module for cancer-based on traditional Yoga texts and research evidence. We have carried out collaborative research studies on Breast Cancer with MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Texas, USA. Consistent improvements have been reported in anxiety, symptom severity, distress, nausea and vomiting, and affect and global QOL14 as well as beneficial effects on natural killer cell counts and radiation-induced DNA damage.^[2-5] However, safety and efficacy of yoga has to be considered carefully in cancer care. Yoga should be practiced under the guidance of trained yoga therapist.

Addressing the root cause and using holistic healing methods along with conventional methods would be the best solution for cancer prevention and management. Along with yoga, other Indian systems of medicines have also shown beneficial effects in cancer care. Hence there is a need for Integrating AYUSH in Palliative Care. Every alternate year, we conduct an international conference on Frontiers in Yoga Research and its Applications. This year we have selected a theme “Integrative Oncology: Future of Cancer Care.” The 22nd INCOFYRA – 2018 will make an effort to integrate Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Homeopathy, and Modern Medicine by bringing prominent researchers and doctors from all these fields under one platform to evolve better cancer care.

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