

Herbal Products: Considerations and Educational Resources for Oncology Nurses

Deborah A. Boyle, MSN, RN, AOCNS®-Emerita, FAAN



BACKGROUND: The use of herbal products, one component of the growing field of integrative cancer care, is a common yet controversial practice.

OBJECTIVES: This article distinguishes nursing issues specific to patient safety when herbal products are used during cancer treatment and identifies available evidence-based resources to enhance patient and professional comprehension.

METHODS: PubMed®, CINAHL®, and Google Scholar™ databases were searched for literature published between 2018 and 2024 specific to the clinical sequelae of the use of herbal products and their interactions with antineoplastic drugs, as well as patient and healthcare providers' perceptions of efficacy and safety.

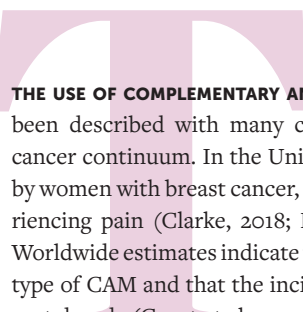
FINDINGS: Patients have misconceptions about the use of herbal products and are generally unaware of these products' potential contraindications when taken in conjunction with antineoplastics. Providers seldom inquire about patients' use of these products and may lack knowledge of their potential interactions with prescription medicines.

KEYWORDS

integrative; complementary; herbs; botanicals; antineoplastics

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/24.CJON.469-476



THE USE OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM) has historically been described with many cancer types and at varying stages along the cancer continuum. In the United States, these practices are commonly used by women with breast cancer, Chinese American individuals, and those experiencing pain (Clarke, 2018; Latte-Naor & Mao, 2019; Nahin et al., 2024). Worldwide estimates indicate that 40%–70% of patients with cancer use some type of CAM and that the incidence of use has risen significantly during the past decade (Grant et al., 2019; Keene et al., 2019; King et al., 2015; Mao et al., 2022; Mentink et al., 2021). Africa, Canada, China, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom include medicinal CAM therapies within their national formularies (Guerra-Martin et al., 2021). Yet, although the link between CAM practices and cancer has been acknowledged, these interventions generally are not understood by U.S. healthcare providers, nor are these practices systematically addressed in clinical practice (Karim et al., 2021; Wode et al., 2023). In the absence of supplemental knowledge about these approaches, oncology nurses may compromise their ability to counsel patients about the safe use of CAM (Carr, 2023).

Methods

PubMed®, CINAHL®, and Google Scholar™ databases were searched for literature published between 2018 and 2024 using the search terms *herbs/botanicals cancer*, *cancer patient beliefs herbs*, *health professionals knowledge herbs*, *herbs cancer safety*, *safety education cancer herbs health professionals*, *MSKCC about herbs*, and *NCCIM herb/botanicals*. Prominent themes from the literature included patient misperceptions, patient reasoning for use, and nondisclosure of patient use of herbal products. Other themes addressed safety implications, use of contemporary nomenclature, and the need for knowledge enhancement of health professionals.

Definitions and Key Distinctions

The increased use of nontraditional medicinal remedies has prompted public and professional interest in ensuring that correct terminology is used to depict the nature and intent of these practices. The terms *complementary medicine* or *alternative medicine* refer to a broad set of healthcare practices that are not part of that country's own tradition or conventional medicine and are not fully integrated into the dominant healthcare system (World Health Organization, 2024). The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (formerly the National Center for Complementary and