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Complementary Therapies for Pain and Symptom Relief in Breast Cancer: Evidence from Recent Studies

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Abstract

Aim and introduction:

This research synthesizes evidence on the effectiveness and safety of complementary and non-pharmacological interventions—including acupuncture, aromatherapy, music therapy, yoga, Qigong, massage, breathing exercises, and mindfulness-based programs—for managing cancer-related pain, treatment-induced adverse effects, and co-occurring symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disturbance, anxiety, and neuropathy among women with breast cancer.

Methods:

A comprehensive search of PubMed, Google Scholar, and MEDLINE (2020–2025) using advanced search strategies and keywords (“complementary medicine,” “pain,” “breast cancer”) identified 219 records, of which 21 met inclusion criteria based on title relevance and research focus.

Results:



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Across studies, multiple complementary therapies showed beneficial effects on pain and symptom burden. Acupuncture, tai chi/Qigong, meditation, music therapy, yoga, massage, and reflexology generally reduced pain, while aromatherapy showed inconsistent outcomes. Perioperative trials demonstrated that music therapy reduced anxiety and postoperative pain, aromatherapy provided mild anxiolytic effects, and acupuncture improved postoperative pain, with combined aromatherapy–music therapy producing the greatest symptom reductions and lower IL-6 and HMGB-1 levels.

Acupuncture exhibited broad benefits across pain, fatigue, insomnia, nausea, menopausal symptoms, and arthralgia, although many systematic reviews were limited by low methodological quality. Acupuncture and breathing-exercise interventions showed improvements in neuropathy, chronic pain, anxiety, depression, and quality of life, with minimal adverse effects. Yoga demonstrated reductions in fatigue-pain-sleep disturbance clusters, and meditation practice was linked to lower next-day pain. Multimodal programs, including Qigong and physiotherapy-yoga-education interventions, improved pain, flexibility, and adherence.

Conclusion:

Complementary therapies appear safe and potentially effective for reducing pain and related symptoms in breast cancer care. However, stronger evidence from large, well-designed trials is needed to support widespread clinical integration.

Keywords: Breast cancer -Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) -Pain management
-Non pharmacological interventions

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