

# Complementary Approaches: Religion, Spirituality

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## Intro and Background

Definitions for prayer and spirituality vary. Generally, prayer can be defined as a petition to God or a god in word or thought,<sup>1</sup> whereas spirituality can be defined as the quality of being concerned with deep, often religious, feelings and beliefs, rather than with the physical parts of life.<sup>2</sup> Spirituality is particularly important for cancer patients, who face challenging questions when they receive their cancer diagnosis, like "Why me?" and "What will happen to me after I die?"<sup>3</sup>

Some researchers think that religiosity may help patients accept their situation and find meaning in their pain. <sup>4, 5</sup> Also, the support of a religious community may help reduce stress (thereby boosting the immune system) <sup>6</sup> and gain information about the best course of action.<sup>7</sup>

## Scientific Research

Cancer patients reporting a higher level of spiritual well-being have also reported a higher quality of life.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup> Spirituality also may have beneficial outcomes for cancer patients.<sup>11</sup> Prostate cancer patients who 'turned to religion' were more likely to find positives in their affliction with cancer. <sup>12</sup> Having a relationship with God also helped cancer patients cope with their diagnosis, without causing them to forego treatment in favor of a divine cure.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, spirituality can be a source of stress; for example, a patient may interpret cancer as a punishment from God or feel anger at God for willing the disease on them. <sup>3</sup> Low spiritual wellbeing can contribute to worse quality of life and health outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

In a randomized, blinded, controlled trial, participants for whom a Christian group prayed showed improvements in emotional and spiritual wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> A meta-analysis of existing research found a correlation between religion/spirituality and the overall physical health, self-reported, of cancer patients.<sup>15</sup>

Research is ongoing; many clinical trials are further investigating how spirituality can affect cancer patients.<sup>16</sup> To learn how to enroll in these trials, or for more information about trials, please visit our section on [Finding Clinical Trials](#).

## Further Reading

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health has published a Physician Data Query (PDQ) [summary on spirituality in cancer care](#). This summary is written for cancer patients.

## US Food and Administration Approval

Prayer and spirituality are neither food nor drugs, so they are not subject to FDA approval.

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*Please be sure to see our [notice on complementary therapies](#). To better understand and evaluate the research described above, read our [Introduction to Scientific Research](#).*

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