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,1 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.2 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?"3

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

Scientific Research
Cancer patients reporting a higher level of spiritual well-being have also reported a higher quality of life.8, 9, 10 Spirituality also may have beneficial outcomes for cancer patients.11Prostate cancer patients who 'turned to religion' were more likely to find positives in their affliction with cancer. 12 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.13

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. 3 Low spiritual wellbeing can contribute to worse quality of life and health outcomes.3

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

Research is ongoing; many clinical trials are further investigating how spirituality can affect cancer patients.16 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.

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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