

# 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](#).

- <sup>1</sup>Merriam-Webster online Dictionary. Prayer. Accessed 2 June 2010. [<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/prayer>.]
- <sup>2</sup>Cambridge Online Dictionary. Spirituality. Accessed 2 June 2010. [<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=76612&dict=CALD>.] [[PUBMED](#)]
- <sup>3</sup> [a b c](#) Puchalski CM. Spirituality in the cancer trajectory. *Ann Oncol*. 2012 Apr;23 Suppl 3:49-55. [[PUBMED](#)]
- <sup>4</sup>Roberts L, Ahemd L, Hall S. Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2007 24; (1): CD000368. Review. PMID: 17253449 [[PUBMED](#)]

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- [7](#)Benson H, Dusek JA, et al. Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: a multicenter randomized trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer. *Am Heart J.* (2006) 151(4): 934-42. [[PUBMED](#)]
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- [12](#)Pascoe EC, Edvardsson D. Which coping strategies can predict beneficial feelings associated with prostate cancer? *J Clin Nurs.* 2016 Jun 29.
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- [14](#)Olver IN, Dutney A. A randomized, blinded study of the impact of intercessory prayer on spiritual well-being in patients with cancer. *Altern Ther Health Med.* 2012 Sep-Oct;18(5):18-27. [[PUBMED](#)]
- [15](#)Gonçalves JP1, Lucchetti G2, Menezes PR3, Vallada H. Religious and spiritual interventions in mental health care: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled clinical trials. *Psychol Med.* 2015 Oct;45(14):2937-49. [[PUBMED](#)]
- [16](#)National Library of Medicine. 2016. *ClinicalTrials.gov*. Retrieved July 1, 2016 from the National Institutes of Health web site: <http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct/search;jsessionid=CD4F0FE5E795081F217CEE924523B4DC?term=spirituality>