Complementary Approaches: Religion, Spirituality

Printed from https://www.cancerquest.org/patients/integrative-oncology/religion-spirituality on 11/02/2026

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.

1 Merriam-Webster online Dictionary. Prayer. Accessed 2 June 2010. [http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/prayer.]
2 Delgado, C. (2005). A discussion of the concept of spirituality. Nursing science quarterly, 18(2), 157–62. (Original work published 2005年4月) [PUBMED]
3 [abc] Puchalski CM. Spirituality in the cancer trajectory. Ann Oncol. 2012 Apr;23 Suppl 3:49-55. [PUBMED]
4 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]
5 Koenig HG, George LK, Peterson BL . Religiosity and remission of depression in medically ill older patients. Am J Psychiatry (1998) 155: 536-542 [PUBMED]

6 Luecken LJ, Compas BE. Stress, coping, and immune function in breast cancer. Ann Behav Med. 2002 Fall;24(4):336-44 [PUBMED]
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]
8 Ambs AH, Miller MF, Smith AW, Goldstein MS, Hsiao AF, Ballard-Barbash R. Religious and Spiritual Practices and Identification among Individuals Living with Cancer and Other Chronic Disease. J Soc Integr Oncol. (2007) 5(2): 53-60. [PUBMED]
9 Balboni TA, Vanderwerker LC, Block SD, Paulk ME, Lathan CS, Peteet JR, Prigerson HG. Religiousness and spiritual support among advanced cancer patients and associations with end-of-life treatment references and quality of life. J Clin Oncol. (2007) 25(5): 555-60 [PUBMED]
10 Tarakeshwar N, Vabderwerker LC, Paulk E, Pearce MJ, Stanislav VK, Prigerson, HG. Religious coping is associated with the quality of life of patients with advanced cancer. Journal of Palliative Medicine. (2006) 9 (3): 646-57 [PUBMED]
11 Richardson P. Assessment and implementation of spirituality and religiosity in cancer care: effects on patient outcomes. Clin J Oncol Nurs. 2012 Aug;16(4):E150-5. [PUBMED]
12 Pascoe EC, Edvardsson D. Which coping strategies can predict beneficial feelings associated with prostate cancer? J Clin Nurs. 2016 Jun 29.
13 Rahnama M, Khoshknab MF, Seyed Bagher Maddah S, Ahmadi F, Arbabisarjou A. Religion as an Alleviating Factor in Iranian Cancer Patients: a Qualitative Study. Asian Pac J Cancer Prev. 2015;16(18):8519-24. [PUBMED]
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