Complementary Approaches: Homeopathy

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Intro and Background
Homeopathic medicine was developed in 1796 by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann. While in good health, Dr. Hahnemann took malaria medicine and experienced symptoms similar to the disease it treated. From this experience he developed the theory that like cures like (or the Law of Similars) and that most ailments could be relieved by a remedy that produces similar symptoms. 1 This theory has existed since the times of ancient Greece and is still important to modern day homeopathic practice. Many of the homeopathic treatments used today come from natural sources such as plants, minerals, or animals (diseased tissues or secretions) 2 and are thought to help kick start the body's own natural defenses by administering solutions with very weak concentrations of the desired ingredient. 3 Even when there is not a single molecule of the desired ingredient present, homeopaths contend that the water retains healing information and capabilities. 4 Skeptics contend that any response is a result of the placebo effect because the treatment does not contain any of the intended component. 5

Available as both prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines, homeopathic treatments are tailored to the individual patient based on lifestyle, symptoms, etc. 6 The intention of the treatments is to treat the whole disease, not just the symptoms. 7 Homeopathic treatments exist for a variety of illnesses, from muscle soreness to HIV. Because of the nature of the treatment, the ingredients in each remedy can vary widely from disease to disease and person to person. 4

Scientific Research
Most of the research on homeopathy does not pertain to cancer treatment, instead investigating whether homeopathy fights colds, muscle aches, respiratory problems, etc. Several studies have found that homeopathic treatments have no effect on cancer cell growth *in vitro.* 8, 9 In contrast, other studies show that they do kill cancer cells.10, 11, 12 In addition, some homeopathic treatments have been shown to counteract some unfavorable side effects of conventional cancer treatments. 13, 14, 15, 16

Exactly how they work, however, remains unclear.13 According to a study at MD Anderson, four homeopathic substances killed breast cancer cells by changing the levels of proteins that regulate the cell cycle, like Rb and p27, and activating cell death via caspase 7, a cell-killer protein.11

The same group at MD Anderson gave homeopathic medications to fifteen patients with brain tumors. Seven of these patients had a type of tumor called glioma, and six of these seven tumors regressed on treatment.10 Another clinical study reported prolonged survival in cancer patients treated homeopathically,17 though this finding was later disputed on several levels, primarily due to experimental bias in the original work.18

Others have evaluated the body of research on homeopathy. An Australian team concluded that there is no reliable evidence that homeopathy cures any disease,19, 20 though a more comprehensive Swiss study concluded that the country's health insurance program should pay for homeopathic remedies--a recommendation it adopted.11

A number of clinical trials have investigated how well homeopathic drugs can reduce side effects associated with cancer and its treatments. Whether homeopathy itself can treat cancer is not being studied; it is being investigated as an "add-on" or complementary therapy. One completed, single-blind trial found that patients who received homeopathic treatment reported higher quality of life.21 Two trials are currently underway.22, 23

For information about ongoing clinical trials involving homeopathy, please visit our section on Finding Clinical Trials.

US Food and Administration Approval
There is not enough evidence that homeopathy fights cancer, and the FDA has not approved homeopathic drugs as cancer treatments. However, homeopathic drugs that fulfill certain requirements do not require FDA approval.24 For complete details, see the FDA's Compliance Policy Guidelines.

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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