Cancer-related fatigue is a potentially debilitating condition that affects many cancer survivors. Qigong, the safe and gentle practice of physical exercises and breathing control developed in Chinese medicine, shows great promise in alleviating cancer-related symptoms such as fatigue. Oncology nurses can improve the lives of cancer survivors by understanding the history and implications of qigong practice for their patients. This article explains the key concepts and benefits of qigong and provides resources for healthcare professionals and patients.

AT A GLANCE

- Cancer-related fatigue is a common symptom experienced by cancer survivors that can be debilitating if interventions are not provided.
- Practicing qigong has the potential to decrease cancer-related fatigue and improve quality of life for cancer survivors.
- Nurses educated on the benefits and basic theory of qigong can be better equipped to assist their patients with using this practice.

KEYWORDS
qigong; physical activity; survivorship; cancer-related fatigue

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Qigong

Benefits for survivors coping with cancer-related fatigue

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Originated in Chinese medicine, qigong has been used to promote health and prevent disease for thousands of years. According to Cohen (1999), "qi is the Chinese word for life energy" and "gong means work or benefits acquired through perseverance and practice" (p. 3). Qigong is a system of cultivating and working with internal energy and includes improving aspects of posture and controlling breathing techniques, as well as practicing gentle movement, self-massage, and meditation (Cohen, 1999). Practicing qigong has the potential to help cancer survivors improve their overall quality of life by managing difficult symptoms, such as cancer-related fatigue.

Case Study

R.E. is a 66-year-old woman with marginal zone lymphoma that is under surveillance. Although she is not currently receiving chemotherapy treatment, she experiences symptoms of fatigue and abdominal pain.

R.E.'s fatigue is exacerbated by comorbidities, including multiple sclerosis, chronic systolic congestive heart failure, depression, and stroke, and the use of medications that are associated with causing fatigue, such as citalopram and levetiracetam (Forest Laboratories, Inc., 2009; UCB, Inc., 2009). She has not been diagnosed with hypothyroidism or vitamin D deficiency. Her most current laboratory test results (white blood cell count = 9.5 x 10^3 u/L, hemoglobin = 14.1 g/dl, and platelet count = 196 x 10^3 u/L) and vital signs (blood pressure = 114/76 mmHg, heart rate = 60 beats per minute, temperature = 97.2°F, and oxygen saturation = 96%) are normal. R.E. takes a multivitamin and garlic capsules as daily nutritional supplements. She reports that she feels fatigued most of the time and tires easily with activity, such as walking far distances or standing for long periods of time. This lack of tolerance to activity prevents R.E. from participating in social events, such as shopping with friends or attending family gatherings, that she enjoys.

Because pharmacologic treatment options have been ineffective in alleviating symptoms and improving her energy level, R.E. asks about alternative treatment options from an integrative health perspective. The clinical nurse recommends that R.E. attend energy therapy sessions with a licensed acupuncturist who is trained in qigong and healing touch therapy. After receiving energy therapy, R.E. reports decreased lower back pain, improved sleep, and increased stamina. Therefore, the clinical nurse encourages continued energy therapy with qigong to increase R.E.'s physical activity and registers her for a healing qigong class.

Background

Cancer treatment can lead to troublesome side effects, such as cancer-related fatigue, which is defined as a persistent and subjective sense of tiredness that interferes with normal daily functioning and is not proportional to recent activity (National Comprehensive Cancer Network, 2019). Cancer-related fatigue differs from the fatigue experienced by healthy people because it is not relieved by additional sleep or rest.