

Use Of Essential Oils and Natural Extracts to Help Counter Side Effects of Radiation During Cancer Treatment

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Abstract

Aromatherapy can be used as an effective complimentary treatment during radiation therapy. The medical community considers side effects such as burning and irritation of the skin tissue relatively minor discomforts. For the patient receiving treatment, these above effects are an additional burden, which can be both uncomfortable and unpleasant. The sensations of improved comfort and well-being are achievable through the inhalation and application of essential oils and other natural extracts. This paper presents the author's firsthand experience of the methods and describes the ingredients used to aid her process of recovery from breast cancer treatment.

Introduction

Cancer. The word itself encompasses over 200 different diseases, yet when it affects an individual, it takes on a greater significance, a different tone, and much more meaning. The day my doctor told me I had breast cancer, she also told me it would not kill me, but it would change my life. In fact, she said it could be one of the best times of your life. And she was right. A diagnosis of cancer is a chance for deep reflection and profound changes. It's a balance of hope and optimism and being realistic. It is about finding out your priorities, relationships, and future plans.

Over the last two years I have been able to look back at my own treatment experience with a different perspective than when I initially went through it. I had a lumpectomy in August 1998 to remove a lump, which I had found myself several months earlier. Several weeks later, I underwent removal of lymph nodes to see if it had spread. Since the lymph glands, bone, and liver scans were clear, they decided a course of radiation was in order, followed by suggested five years of tamoxifen (which I decided against). For the next following six weeks, I had daily radiation treatments (5 days a week), and coped with the physical and mental side effects of extreme fatigue and skin irritation. The following account is an attempt to share how essential oils aided that process for me.

Discussion

The standard radiation treatment regime for breast cancer of my sort (stage one, non-aggressive, estrogen/progesterone receptor positive) involved irradiating the area daily (5 times a week) for 5-6 weeks. The actual process takes less than a minute on the

table and is painless. There are few physical side effects, and the worst of this I found to be the fatigue. After several weeks, after beginning treatment, the skin begins to redden as if it were becoming sunburned. Because the tissue-damaging effects are cumulative, the symptoms steadily worsen, and the worst affects with skin integrity are not realized until the last several weeks. The entire square area of breast tissue becomes reddened, but it is more apparent and tender underneath the breast. For this reason, underwire bras are not recommended. The pressure of tight clothing can also increase irritation and comfort level, so patients are advised to wear loose clothing. Preventative and restorative measures can be undertaken to alleviate this damage.

Recommendations

The first thing that you are told is not to put anything on the area being irradiated. The reason for this is because the marks (paintpen) that the radiotherapists draw on you to align the radiation beams each day need to be undisturbed, so soap cannot be used on the area when bathing. It is not because topically applied oils may interfere with the treatment as these rays will go right through any topical treatment, but it is critical not to remove the marks. I had to have my marks replaced every other day and always on the Monday after two days off. They simply rubbed off onto my clothing especially in the hot climate of Florida and possibly more so because of my use of essential oil formulations. So, in the third week, I finally opted for pinpoint-size tattoos so that I did not have to worry about it. (If going through this again, I would go with the tattoos from the start. They are very tiny and hardly visible, thus eliminating the need to replace the marks on a daily basis)

I was told that I could use a non-alcohol aloe formula before and after radiation treatment, to ease the burn, but nothing else was advised, including anti-perspirant deodorant! The aluminum content in the latter can interfere with the radiation, so they recommended the deodorant "stone" which I was already using Interestingly enough, the hair under my arm stopped growing during treatment and two years later is still scant (a positive side effect!). My oncologist and radiologist were fully aware of my profession, knowledge, and intent to treat myself in a complementary manner. Both of them said that I could use anything I thought might help with skin irritation after treatments and any herbal supplements as well. So I decided to use my own formulas which I have outlined below.

Aloe

Because a commercial preparation of pure aloe (without preservatives and alcohol) is hard to find, I used pure fresh aloe from the plant before and after my radiation treatments. Since they grow well in Florida, I obtained five large plants and daily used the fresh plant from which I scraped the gel. These were the very large leaf aloe - *Aloe*

barbadensis which were about 2 inches wide at the thickest part. I took a 2x2-inch section and split it open like a book, carefully avoiding the spines and edges, which I had heard could cause irritation. Once it was open, I loosened the sticky gel, and rubbed it all over the area of the breast that was irradiated. It was pretty sticky and messy, but dried quickly. I applied the gel before and after each treatment, and at other odd times during the day, after bathing or when I remembered. This in itself was very soothing and cooling to the skin.

Aromatherapy for Incisions

Surgical procedures included the initial lumpectomy (one inch incision) followed by lymph gland removal (3 " incision) under my right arm. In both cases, I applied an essential oil mixture on and around the incisions as soon as the tape was removed. I used Helichrysum (*Helichrysum italicum*) and *Artemisia arborescens-high chamazulene*, Pacific Northwest variety. I used 50:50 ratio of essential oils: diluted at 10% in fractionated coconut oil. I applied this several times a day and at night. This aided healing, preventing any inflammation or infection. Thanks partly to having the fortune of a good plastic surgeon, the scars are hardly visible now.

Aromatherapy for Inflammation

I also used a water 'spritzer' on the irradiated breast. I used a four ounce spray bottle filled with distilled water to which I added equal amounts (approx. 2 mls each) of Helichrysum (*Helichrysum italicum*) and Blue Tansy (*Tanacetum annuum*, annual tansy, not the *vulgaris*!). The latter oil is high in chamazulene and smells wonderfully sweet fruity and appealingly edible compared to the other blue oils like yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) or German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*). I used this to spray the area during the day after radiation, and after my morning shower. Toward the end of treatment, when the skin was becoming increasingly tender I sprayed more often. The spritzer I used daily, 7 days a week for during the six weeks of treatment and I continued for a month afterward, as though the severe irritation diminished rapidly, the redness persisted for several weeks past treatment.

Results

I felt very little irritation, though my breast was becoming tanned! Toward the end of treatment, the last week and continuing a few weeks, the skin under the breast was becoming more irritated, so I increased the applications of oil formulations to 6 times a day. By two weeks after treatment ceased, all serious irritation was gone. I continued the essential oil blend as a topical treatment for another month after radiation treatments. As much as he didn't want to admit it or hear about it, my radiologist was amazed at the lack of burn, especially in the underneath area. The

radiologist had recommended the standard cortisone treatment, which I did not use. He did finally ask me what I had done, as I appeared to have fared better than most. After I told him he still had that look of skepticism and admitted he didn't really want to know, nor was he interested in pursuing it further since it was out of the realm of ordinary medicine.

Aromatherapy for Fatigue

The other side effect from radiation is extreme tiredness and fatigue. Considering that radiation is actually destroying tissue, and the effects can last up to a year, it is logical to find that the body aims to rest itself as much as possible so that repair and recovery can occur during inactivity. Thus the fatigue. That was on top of the strain of obtaining daily treatments: the drive to hospital, waiting your turn, the treatment and return drive home, and then trying to keep up with daily routines of family and work! This feeling of fatigue is gradual, builds up, and is not the same for everyone. It did not set in until the second week for me. I found that I had energy early in the morning, so I continued my daily runs and workouts. I set my treatment time mid morning, which would allow for a nap after my lunch. This way I could effectively work on clients or do my research work in the afternoons. I was then in bed for the night soon after dinner!

Looking back, I felt as if the entire three months were a dream as I had spent so much time resting or sleeping, and do not remember many simple things that happened. Perhaps this is a survival mechanism of the body, or at least a good excuse for memory loss! I also had some incredible dreams that stuck with me and gave me a sense of out-of-the-ordinary. I kept a journal to record thoughts, feelings and affirmations.

I used stimulatory oils Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*- camphor variety), peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), and basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) diffused in the air in the afternoons. During my rest times and at night I kept relaxing oils in my bedroom diffuser to aid with deep rest. My choices varied between blends using assorted oils: lavender (*Lavendula officinalis*), neroli (*Citrus aurantium*), rose (*Rosa damascena*), and geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*). I found that I was most attracted to geranium (Chinese/Egypt) and tended to keep that in the diffuser. I also took baths with 5-10 drops of geranium oil. I found that that helped with my moods and well being. There were times I felt very depressed and the geranium seem be to be a balance for me. Interesting, it was also "prescribed" by several independent healers doing long distance Reiki work on me.

Speaking of my own innermost personal experiences, I feel that the although the radiation burn goes away within a few weeks of treatment, the internal effects of

treatment can last up to a year, or longer. It took me a year to really get my energy back. Many of the mental/emotional/spiritual changes I am still processing! The aromatherapy community gave me such an outpouring of love, prayers and healing energy. I will never forget the feeling I had immediately prior to the second surgery visit. Someone had let the Internet list (consisting of 1100+ people) know to send me healing 'vibes' during the surgery times. Right before they wheeled me in, I had the most incredible 'vision' while lying there. I 'felt' many faces above, all looking over me and this was the most incredible feeling. I felt so protected, watched over and safe- an incredible rare feeling that many were with me at that moment. This outpouring sustained me through the next few months and there is no way to express the gratitude I felt to those folks, most of whom I'd never met. I still hear occasionally from people who participated in that event!

My perspective is that we are all different and handle these sorts of things in our own different ways. In addition caregivers can project positive or negative views onto patients without realizing it. For instance the radiation technician related a story to me of one particular executive lady (obviously with a high powered job), had received radiation therapy in her lunch hour, had never missed a day of work, and dismissed radiation therapy as a "piece of cake". This sort of story can make you feel inadequate when you cannot measure up to this achievement and also have to admit to fatigue as a problem.

I also found it difficult to rest properly, until forced by circumstance. I'm the very active type, and admitting to fatigue was tough for me. This experience taught me to recognize and to become assertive about my needs. I learned how to say 'no' and tell people I did not want company, visitors, or did not have the energy to be my usual energetic self. My family and friends soon began to recognize and accommodate my needs. Often families of patients (and patients themselves) will be in denial, partly because they do not want to admit their loved one has cancer, but also because they cannot handle the change that treatment brings to a lifestyle they are used to. Becoming assertive about ones needs can facilitate recovery.

Conclusion

Oddly enough, for 6 years I have been a volunteer in the "Look Good Feel Better Program" (co-sponsored by the American Cancer Society, the National Cosmetology Association and the Fragrance, Cosmetic and Toiletries Association) at the same cancer hospital where I received my treatments. Since my experience I have become more active in volunteer work by participating in cancer groups and speaking at programs about my experience and the benefits of aromatherapy as complementary treatments for all forms of cancer treatment. During my treatment, I also participated in a research program concerned with fatigue and afterwards, sat in on the group to

share my experience with those going through cancer treatment and experiencing fatigue.

It is important to impart to people undergoing treatment of this sort that it WILL get better with time and it is OK to be in pain and to ask for help. It is also important to understand it is common during this period to be tired all the time, and its OK to be waited on and taken care of by others. The last issue, that of being on the receiving end, was the hardest part of my treatments. Once I understood that allowing someone to give something to me was 'giving' him or her an opportunity to help, I was able to 'take' while 'giving'. Still there were moments I felt sad, confused, and depressed, but at those times I chose to inhale rose (*Rosa damascena*), and it soon passed. There were also feelings of grief, and I had used rose after my Mom passed away ten years ago, so there was a connection there for me with rose and grief work.

There is no quick fix in life, or during cancer treatments. The only way over is through. Learning how to go through these trials, we hopefully come away stronger and wiser. I daily thank the Universe for my experience and that I had my oils to help me make it a more pleasant journey. Hopefully sharing my experiences with aromatherapy will enable others journeys to be a little bit less scary, and certainly more pleasant.