Yoga May Improve Quality of Life, Sleep in Cancer Survivors

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FROM AN AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY PRESSCAST

Yoga, widely practiced for maintaining flexibility and coping with stress, may also benefit cancer survivors who report impaired sleep quality and fatigue, results from a nationwide study demonstrated.

During a press briefing sponsored by the American Society of Clinical Oncology, lead author Karen Mustian, Ph.D., of the University of Rochester (N.Y.) Medical Center, discussed results from what she said is the largest randomized, controlled study to date examining a yoga program designed specifically for cancer survivors.

The researchers used the University of Rochester Cancer Center Community Clinical Oncology Program (CCOP) Research Base to conduct a phase II/III clinical trial at nine CCOP centers, examining the efficacy of yoga for improving sleep quality, fatigue, and quality of life among 410 cancer survivors who reported problems sleeping after completing adjuvant therapy for their cancer.

To be eligible, patients were required to have a sleep disturbance level of 3 or greater on a scale ranging from 0-10, Dr. Mustian said. Those who had attended a yoga class within the last 3 months were excluded, as were those with sleep apnea and those with distant metastatic disease.

Patients were randomized to standard follow-up care or to standard follow-up care plus enrollment in Yoga for Cancer Survivors, (YOCAS), which encompasses components of hatha yoga and restorative yoga, including postures, breathing exercises, and mindfulness (including meditation exercises and visualization). The 75-minute classes met twice a week for 4 weeks.

At baseline and at the end of 4 weeks the researchers used the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) to measure sleep, the Multidimensional Fatigue Symptom Inventory to measure fatigue, and the Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy measurement system to assess quality of life. The mean age of participants was 56, most (96%) were female, and 75% were breast cancer patients.

Dr. Mustian reported that at the end of 4 weeks patients in the yoga group improved their overall sleep quality by 22%, while patients in the control group improved their overall sleep quality by 12%, a difference that was statistically significant.

At baseline, 84% of patients in the yoga group and 83% of patients in the control group had clinically impaired sleep quality defined as a PSQI score of 5 or higher. At the end of the 4-week study, 31% of patients in the yoga group recovered and no longer had clinically impaired sleep quality, while only 16% of patients in the control group recovered.

Dr. Mustian also reported that, compared with their counterparts in the control group, patients in the yoga group had significantly greater reductions in fatigue (42% vs. 12%, respectively), daytime sleepiness (29% vs. 5%), and quality of life (6% vs. 0%). In addition, use of sleep medication decreased by 21% in the yoga group but increased by 5% in the control group.

The trial was funded by grants from the National Cancer Institute. ■

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The Yoga for Cancer Survivors program encompasses components of hatha yoga and restorative yoga, including postures and mindfulness.