A Literature Review Supporting Massage Therapy as a Potential Intervention for Stress Reduction in Women at Risk for Breast & Ovarian Cancer

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Introduction:
Women at high risk for developing breast and ovarian cancer experience high levels of psychological and biophysical stress. Thus, during early detection and prevention of these cancers these women can benefit from interventions aimed at reducing stress, decreasing inflammation, and enhancing immune functioning. To support this hypothesis a literature review was conducted on one such intervention--therapeutic massage--to explore its effects on reducing stress, in general, as well as among women already diagnosed with cancer, and to explore autonomic nervous system functioning and immune cytokine levels.

Method(s):
Published studies had to meet the following criteria: the intervention was identifiable as reducing stress; outcome measures were identifiable as psychological and/or neuroendocrine stress-related variables; and the articles were in English.

Results:
Findings reveal stressed persons stay immunosuppressed long after the stressor is removed. Psychological and biophysical stressors both activate the HPA axis resulting in secretion of stress hormones. A cascade of pro-inflammatory cytokines can lead to depression, fatigue, sleep disruptions, and inhibit immune functioning that is critical for protecting cells against malignant transformations.

Discussion:
Empirical support exists for the use of massage therapy as an effective way to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding management of the symptom cluster (stress, depression, fatigue, and sleep disturbances), modulating autonomic nervous system functioning, and improving immune functioning and wellbeing among high risk cancer populations. Taken together, the studies support the hypothesis that massage, like other mind-body therapies, can be important in modulating autonomic function and indicate the relevance of HRV in assessing potential mechanisms by which these therapies exert beneficial effects on stress and potentially on inflammation. Stress reduction addressed in this literature
review meets the goals of Healthy People 2010 for disease prevention and improved wellbeing.

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