A Qigong Approach to Treating Breast Cancer

by Suzanne Friedman, LAc, DMQ (China)

Introduction

Cancer affects one in three people in the United States. According to the World Health Organization, every year 200,000 women die worldwide from breast cancer. The American Cancer Society reports that in the United States alone there are approximately 50,000 deaths per year due to breast cancer. Most cancer patients seek conventional, allopathic medicine as their initial treatment modality. However, the use of Chinese medicine and other complementary therapies is becoming increasingly prevalent. A population-based study in San Francisco, California reported in Medical Anthropology Quarterly (Issue 13(2): 214-222, 1999) found that 72% of women with breast cancer used at least one form of complementary medicine. One third of the women used two forms.

Biomedicine and TCM

Western, biomedical cancer treatment protocols often result in the patient feeling ill, weak, nauseous or in pain. While TCM has nothing in its arsenal to compare with or replace surgery, chemotherapy or radiation, it does have the unique ability to help balance and regulate qi flow, yin and yang, excess and deficiency and organ function. TCM enhances healing to help stop or slow the progression of cancer. Perhaps as important, and not possible with Western medical treatment, a patient can participate in her own healing process with medical qigong exercises, alterations in diet and taking herbs. This empowers the patient and helps reduce the feelings of helplessness or victimization often felt by cancer patients.

Medical Qi Gong Theory

The medical qigong approach to cancer calls for a deeper examination into and gives greater weight to the patient’s psycho-emotional history. A person’s qi and blood flow are directly affected by emotions and past traumas that may have become stuck in the patient’s body.

From a medical qigong perspective, breast cysts and chronic cystic mastitis are often supported by the internal evils of anger, worry and depression. All of these emotions affect the patient’s liver and spleen. When the spleen qi is weakened, the smooth flow of liver qi is disrupted. This leads to qi and phlegm stagnation and the formation of nodules. Over a long period of time, this stagnation can lead to phlegm accumulation and blood stasis. In a similar process, grief can congeal the qi in the chest and lungs, causing qi and blood stagnation, which leads to the formation of nodules in the breasts or lungs.

Benign tumors are often viewed as the result of stagnant liver and gallbladder qi. Two potential contributors to tumor formation are liver fire from rage and lung qi stagnation due to grief or sorrow. They may both be present at the same time in the one person. It is said that heat from rage coalesces the phlegm in the chest into solid masses.

Simply put, the suppression of emotions uses energy. It requires a continual supply of energy to maintain the suppression. This energy is diverted away from the immune system. National Cancer Institute psychologist Sandra Levy has shown that seriously ill breast cancer patients who expressed high levels of depression, anxiety and hostility survived longer than those who showed little distress. This supports medical qigong theories that connect the release of emotions with increased healing.

As anger turns to depression and grief turns to despair, an energetic matrix supporting the stagnation becomes established in the tissues. This is why treatment that calls for surgical removal of a cyst but does not address the emotions that supported the cyst often results in the return of the cyst in the future. It’s similar to cutting down a weed without pulling out the roots. If the roots remain in place, the weed will grow back. This is precisely why patients should be encouraged to seek counseling after they receive a diagnosis of cancer.

Medical qigong exercise prescriptions enable the patient to purge evil qi from the organs found to be at the root of the disease. This empowers patients by giving them some control and participation in their healing process. The lungs store grief and sorrow and are also the general location of breast cancer. The liver stores anger and depression. These are the two primary organs targeted by sound vibration exercise prescriptions for breast cancer.

Modern Physics

Modern physics confirms the teachings of the ancient Daoists. The Daoists taught that all living matter vibrates at particular wavelengths. Sound vibrates. Color vibrates. Our body’s cells all vibrate. Medical qigong exercises involve the use of sound to purge excess, clear heat, and break apart stagnation. Modern electrical devices that emit sound are commonly used for this very purpose, such as in lithotripsy, Sonicate toothbrushes, and devices like the Ossatron, an FDA approved device that uses ultrasonic waves to treat tennis elbow.

Vibration causes objects to move and even break apart. Sound vibration qigong exercises cause the tissues to vibrate at a different frequency than normal to help release stagnation and allow the immune system access to areas of disease.

Qi Gong Exercise

There are two components to an effective qi gong exercise for people with breast cancer. One is saying the healing sounds associated with the lungs and the liver. The other is an exercise known as Cleanse the Qi. They are best practiced together. The healing sounds can also be practiced by themselves during sitting meditation.

The healing sound for the lungs and breasts is shang. The healing sound for the liver and gall bladder is guo. The exercise consists of enunciating one of the sounds during exhalation. Practice time should be divided in half with one half of the practice dedicated to the sound shang and the other half to the sound guo.

Cleanse the Qi is an ancient qi gong exercise that is widely used in modern Chinese hospitals. It purges excess from the body. Practicing this exercise with the healing sounds helps to ground the mind while releasing stagnation from the liver and lungs. I encourage readers to practice this exercise and pay attention to how they feel afterwards.
Cleanse the Qi: A Step by Step Guide:

- Begin by standing with your feet shoulder width apart. Keep your knees slightly bent and your toes facing forward. Tuck your tailbone forward to minimize the curve of the lower back.

- Tuck your chin in slightly and line up your head over your torso by standing straight up. Close your eyes or softly gaze in front of you.

- Allow your hands to hang naturally by your sides with the palms facing the sides of the legs.

- Begin meditative qigong breathing. Stick your abdomen out on the inhale and pull it back in on the exhale. Take a few deep, slow breaths to ready yourself.

- On an inhale raise your arms out to the sides, with your palms facing the earth, until your arms are at shoulder height. Visualize gathering the energy around you as if you were gathering a bright white light.

- While still inhaling, continue to raise your arms over your head with your palms turning to face each other. Continue to visualize gathering the energy around you like a bright white light.

- Exhale slowly while toning either the shang or guo sound and slowly bring your hands down the front of your body with your palms facing the earth. Round your elbows so your fingertips point towards each other. Visualize the bright white light energy washing through your entire body as the exhaled sound releases all stagnation.

- Repeat by inhaling and bringing your arms out to the sides and over your head, then exhaling a healing sound as you bring your arms down the front of your body with the palms facing the earth.

Cleanse the Qi is one slow, fluid movement that follows the breath. There is no stopping during or between repetitions. The number of times per day and repetitions of each exercise are both determined by the severity of the disease. Patients are generally encouraged to practice for five to ten minutes, twice a day.

In addition to the above exercise, patients are encouraged to take daily walks outside.

Oxygen, researchers have discovered is the most vital component in the production of ATP (adenosine triphosphate). Biologists call ATP "the energy currency of life." It is the compound that transports chemical energy within cells. The combination of breath, movement and visualization is what makes this a potent qigong exercise. The deep breaths taken during this exercise saturate the blood with extra oxygen. This is one of the quickest and most effective ways to cleanse the bloodstream and deliver energizing oxygen throughout the body.

Conclusion

From a biomedical perspective, qigong meditation calms the nervous system, reduces stress hormone production and enhances the ability of the immune system to fight disease. From a Chinese medical perspective, qigong meditation harmonizes the organs, fills the body with life force energy and calms the spirit.

Suzanne Friedman, LAc, DMQ (China) is the Chair of the Medical Qigong Science department at the Acupuncture & Integrative Medicine College, in Berkeley, California, and editorial director of Longevitytree.com. She runs Breath of the Dao clinic in San Francisco.