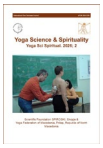
Scientific Foundation SPIROSKI, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
& Yoga Federation of Macedonia, Prilep, Republic of North Macedonia
Yoga Science & Spirituality. 2026 Jun 30; 2(1):13-15.
https://doi.org/10.3889/yss.2026.6848
eISSN: 2955-2729
Category: *Yoga Therapy*
Section: *Original Article*



Integrative Medicine and Complementary Practices for Cancer Care: Emphasizing Yoga and Spiritual Dimensions

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Citation: Jain MD. Integrative Medicine and Complementary Practices for Cancer Care: Emphasizing Yoga and Spiritual Dimensions. Yoga Sci Spiritual. 2026 Jun 30; 2(1):13-15. https://doi.org/10.3889/yss.2026.6848
Keywords: Integrative Oncology; Complementary Therapies; Yoga Therapy; Mindfulness Meditation; Spiritual Well-Being
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E-mail: mjainbhilai@gmail.com
Received: 04-Apr-2026
Revised: 10-May-2026
Accepted: 21-Jun-2026
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Funding: This research did not receive any financial support
Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist

Abstract

BACKGROUND: Cancer care has increasingly adopted an integrative medicine approach that combines evidence-based conventional oncology treatments with complementary therapies to address the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs of patients. Among complementary interventions, yoga and meditation have gained substantial scientific support for improving quality of life, reducing treatment-related symptoms, and enhancing spiritual well-being.

AIM: To review the role of integrative medicine in cancer care, with particular emphasis on yoga, meditation, and spirituality as complementary approaches for improving symptom management, psychological resilience, and overall quality of life in oncology patients.

METHODS: A narrative review of published literature, clinical practice guidelines, and evidence-based resources was conducted to examine the principles of integrative medicine and the scientific evidence supporting yoga, meditation, and other complementary therapies in cancer care. The review also explored the spiritual dimensions of these interventions and their integration into comprehensive oncology practice.

RESULTS: Current evidence indicates that yoga and meditation significantly reduce stress, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, pain, and depressive symptoms while improving health-related quality of life among cancer patients. Clinical guidelines from integrative oncology organizations support the incorporation of these interventions as adjuncts to standard cancer treatment. Yoga combines physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation to promote physical recovery, emotional resilience, and spiritual growth. Meditation and mindfulness-based interventions enhance psychological well-being, reduce emotional distress, and foster acceptance and inner peace. Additional complementary therapies, including acupuncture, massage, energy healing, and nutrition counselling, may further contribute to holistic patient care. Spiritual care strengthens patients' ability to cope with existential challenges, improves resilience, and supports adherence to conventional treatment when safely integrated under medical supervision.

CONCLUSION: Integrative medicine provides a comprehensive framework for cancer care by combining conventional oncology with evidence-based complementary therapies that address the whole person. Yoga and meditation are among the most effective complementary interventions, offering measurable physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits that enhance quality of life. Continued research and culturally appropriate implementation of integrative approaches may further establish these therapies as standard components of comprehensive oncology care.

Introduction

Emerging clinical and scientific evidence demonstrates that complementary practices for cancer care can effectively mitigate stress, anxiety, pain, and fatigue, leading to meaningful improvements in quality of life [1], [2], [3]. Furthermore, the integration of spirituality into cancer care may help patients develop greater resilience, emotional balance, and overall well-being [4], [5].

Cancer care has evolved beyond purely biomedical interventions to encompass a more comprehensive model known as integrative medicine [6], [7]. This approach combines evidence-based conventional therapies—such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and biological treatments—with complementary practices to support the whole person. Integrative medicine addresses not only

physical symptoms but also emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects, recognizing that cancer affects every dimension of life. In the context of yoga and spirituality, practices like yoga and meditation offer profound tools for healing, drawing from ancient Eastern philosophies that emphasize mind-body harmony [5], [8].

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in oncology is widespread, with surveys indicating that many patients incorporate therapies such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, mind-body practices, and energy healing into their regimens. This article highlights yoga and meditation as core complementary practices, supported by growing scientific evidence, and explores their spiritual underpinnings to provide a framework for their application in cancer care [6], [7].

What is Integrative Medicine?

Integrative medicine is defined as a patient-centred approach that integrates conventional medical treatments with complementary therapies to optimize health and healing. [9], [10] Unlike alternative medicine, which may replace standard care, integrative practices are used alongside it to enhance outcomes and manage side effects [6]. Key principles include:

Holistic Focus: Treating the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of the patient.

Evidence-Based Integration: Selecting therapies backed by research, such as those investigated in clinical trials.

Personalization: Tailoring interventions to individual patient preferences and cultural backgrounds, including spiritual beliefs.

In cancer care, integrative medicine has gained traction at major centers, where programs offer services like yoga, meditation, and nutrition counselling to improve post-treatment wellness. This model mends the historical divide between Western medicine and Eastern traditions, putting patient well-being first [7], [11].

Complementary Practices in Cancer Care

Complementary practices encompass a range of therapies that support conventional treatment. While diverse, they often share a foundation in promoting balance and self-healing. Below, we focus on those with strong ties to yoga and spirituality.

Yoga: A Mind-Body Practice for Physical and Emotional Resilience

Yoga, originating from ancient Indian spiritual traditions, integrates physical postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation to foster unity between body, mind, and spirit [5], [8]. In cancer care, yoga is recommended for its ability to reduce stress, improve sleep, decrease fatigue, and alleviate treatment side effects [1], [2], [3]. Studies show that regular yoga practice can enhance quality of life, with growing evidence supporting its benefits in managing anxiety and depression [2].

For instance, yoga helps mitigate chemotherapy-induced nausea and pain, while promoting physical strength and flexibility during recovery. Spiritually, yoga encourages mindfulness and self-awareness, aligning with yogic philosophy's emphasis on inner peace and transcendence of suffering. Patients often report a deeper sense of purpose and connection, which can be transformative in facing cancer's existential challenges [4], [5].

Meditation and Mindfulness: Cultivating Spiritual Well-Being

Meditation, including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), is a cornerstone of spiritual practice in many traditions, including yoga. It involves focused attention, breath awareness, or guided imagery to calm the mind and reduce emotional distress. In oncology, meditation has been shown to ease anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, and depression, with evidence indicating improvements in overall mental health [3].

Spiritually, meditation fosters a connection to the inner self or a higher power, helping patients navigate the fear and uncertainty of cancer. Programs incorporating guided imagery and relaxation techniques have demonstrated efficacy in reducing pain and enhancing emotional resilience [3], [4]. When combined with yoga, these practices amplify their effects, creating a synergistic approach to holistic healing.

Other Complementary Therapies with Spiritual Elements

Beyond yoga and meditation, therapies like acupuncture, massage, and energy healing (e.g., Reiki) often incorporate spiritual dimensions. Acupuncture, rooted in traditional Chinese medicine, may relieve nausea and hot flashes, while massage aids in stress reduction and lymphatic drainage. Energy therapies, such as Healing Touch, emphasize heart-centred intention, aligning with spiritual concepts of universal energy. Nutrition counselling and herbal approaches also support spiritual wellness by promoting mindful eating and harmony with nature.

Evidence and Research

Research supports the integration of these practices into cancer care [6]. National surveys reveal that mind-body therapies like yoga and meditation are among the most utilized CAM approaches, with usage rates around 17.7% among adults. Clinical guidelines from organizations like the Society for Integrative

Oncology recommend yoga and meditation for improving quality of life, with moderate to strong evidence supporting symptom management [6], [7].

However, potential risks exist, such as interactions with treatments or over-reliance on unproven methods. Patients should consult healthcare providers to ensure safe integration. Ongoing studies, including those at centers like City of Hope, continue to further evaluate these therapies through rigorous research [9].

Spiritual Dimensions in Cancer Care

Spirituality plays a pivotal role in integrative medicine, offering a framework for meaning-making amid illness [4]. Yoga and meditation, as spiritual practices, help patients transcend physical suffering, fostering acceptance and inner strength. This aligns with yogic teachings on the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit (atman) [5], [8]. In diverse cultural contexts, including Indian traditions prevalent in regions like Chhattisgarh, these practices resonate deeply, enhancing cultural relevance in care.

By addressing spiritual needs, integrative approaches can reduce existential distress, leading to better adherence to treatment and improved outcomes.

Conclusion

Integrative medicine, with its emphasis on complementary practices like yoga and meditation, offers a promising path for enhancing cancer care. By incorporating spiritual elements, it empowers patients to achieve holistic well-being. As research advances, these practices may increasingly become a standard component of oncology care, bridging science and spirituality for optimal healing. Future studies should explore culturally tailored interventions to broaden accessibility.

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