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Herbs and Natural Supplements for Breast Cancer

By Brian B. Carter, MS, LAc

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A returning patient called me yesterday. She was a breast cancer survivor when I saw her as a student intern in Chinese medical school. If I had been more confident at the time, I would have suggested she be diligent in preventing a recurrence of breast cancer, and explained how she might attempt that with Chinese medicine.

Even if I had, however, she might not have followed my advice, because Chinese medicine's credibility has yet to catch up with its sophistication, efficacy, and research.

It's well known that acupuncture can help with palliative strategies in cancer– for pain relief, itching relief, and nausea. The topic examined less often is: can Chinese medicine fight cancer directly? Many acupuncture teachers and practitioners warn us not to claim that it can – they suggest there's some law against us treating cancer, and you can see how reactive conservative doctors might be to the idea. They are accustomed to having control of the treatment of all cancer, regardless of whether they can help individual patients, or how much damage their therapies cause. Still, there is research and a clinical track record that suggests Chinese medicine can do more than just reduce discomforts.

I can't resolve all by myself in this short space the political issues and ethical issues of alternative medical treatment. But, I suggest that if a patient who refuses conventional treatment, then their alternative practitioners should find out everything they can and do all they can to help the patient recover, or at least become more comfortable.

Even in my small alternative medicine library, I have 2 books on Chinese herbs for cancer, and a third that summarizes the research on natural compounds used in cancer therapy. On PubMed, I found even more scientific references about herbs and breast cancer specifically. It's not the case that there isn't research on this topic. Instead, as with much Chinese medicine research, the information is either unknown, or unused by Western physicians. What follows is a short summary of the scientific information I found (in less than an hour) on alternative medicine and breast cancer. At the end, I've provided some herbal formulas for practitioners.

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Human Studies on Natural Compounds for Cancer Therapy:

John Boik, MacOM, LAc has contributed a weighty work called *Natural Compounds in Cancer Therapy* (Oregon Medical Press, 2001). It not only reviews hundreds of scientific references, but also explains many specific cancer disease processes. The following human studies are drawn from that book, but their specific references are also included.

Scientific research is done either *in vitro* (test tube), in animals, or in humans. Knowing that any non-human research is easily discounted by skeptics, I've chosen only the human studies. However, the other studies are also interesting and helpful, so if you want more, get Boik's book. All of the following are specific for breast cancer.

6 Bromelain tablets for 10 days corrected deficient macrophage activity. (1)

Vitamin C was found to not necessarily good for breast cancer and may actually have accelerated some patients' deaths, but those who lived had fewer recurrences. (2,3)

Eleutherooccus stimulated the immune system in breast cancer patients. (4)

Higher levels of fat intake in breast cancer patients was associated with increased risks of recurrence and death. (5)

In post mastectomy breast cancer patients, there were higher survival rates among those who took enzymes. (6)

Enzyme therapy also improved weight gain, fatigue, depression and quality of life. (6)

A diet of 20% fish oil (24g/kg) improved the anti-tumor effect of the chemotherapy drug mitomycin due to enhanced lipid peroxidation. [This was a combined human/animal study where human cells were studied after transplantation to an animal] (7)

Vitamin D3 helps chemotherapy drugs work better. (8)

Chinese herbs for Breast Cancer

I have access to three sources for Chinese herbs and breast cancer. One is a book called *Anticancer Chinese Drugs* by Lien & Li, which surveys more than 120 plants used to treat cancer, and examines the chemical structure and effects of individual compounds from those plants. Below are 4 compounds from this book specifically for breast cancer. Unfortunately, none of these are among the 500 or so common Chinese herbs referred to in the standard reference, *Materia Medica*, by Bensky & Barolet. Note that there are closer to 12,000 substances called herbs used here and there in Chinese medicine.

Labiatae *I. longitubis* inhibits br ca cells *in vitro* (Lien/Li, 10).

Maytansine (from *maytanus oratus*, *serrata*, *buchananii*, and *hookeri*) prevents polymerization of tubulin to microtubules (*ibid*, 85). (9)

9-hydroxy-2-methyl-ellipticinum (from *ochrosia moorei* and *borbonica*) has therapeutic value in advanced breast cancer (*ibid*, 78). (10)

In phase III clinical trials, VP-16 (from *podophyllum berberidaceae*) has caused responses in a number of cancers including breast cancer (*ibid*, 60). (11)

More Science:

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A quick search of PubMed for more research on herbs for breast cancer yielded 4 interesting results:

Huang lian (coptis) inhibited tumor growth (gastric, colon, breast)... "These results indicate that traditional Chinese herbs may represent a new source of agents designed for selective inhibition of cyclin dependent kinases in cancer therapy." (12)

Hemsleya amabilis extract significantly inhibited tumor cell growth and colony formation and promoted tumor cell death.(13)

Triptolide (TPL), a diterpenoid triepoxide purified from the Chinese herb Tripterygium wilfordii Hook F, in vitro inhibited the proliferation and colony formation of tumor cells and the antitumor effect of TPL was comparable or superior with that of conventional antitumor drugs, such as Adriamycin, mitomycin, and cisplatin. (14)

Huang qi root specifically inhibits gastric cancer cells growth in vitro – its mechanism is mainly inhibition of cancer cell growth, not attacking or dismantling of existing cancer cells. (15)

Chinese Herbal Formulas for Breast Cancer (For Practitioner Reference)

My final source is a book called Treating Cancer with Chinese Herbs (Hsu, Ohai Press, 1990). This book is mainly for practitioners to learn from and use. It is not scientifically referenced – of course, some Chinese physicians and writers are not familiar with the Western insistence on always quoting your sources, so some of this information may have science behind it. We just can't tell from Hsu's book. But here's a suggestion patients can try at home:

Combine the juice of 90g of fresh asparagus (or 30g peeled) with yellow wine (a traditional Chinese wine made from rice) once a day.

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Acupuncturist, herbalist, and medical professor Brian B. Carter founded the alternative health megasite *The Pulse of Oriental Medicine* (<http://www.PulseMed.org/>). He is the author of the book "Powerful Body, Peaceful Mind: How to Heal Yourself with Foods, Herbs, and Acupressure" (November, 2004). Brian speaks on radio across the country, and has been quoted and interviewed by *Real Simple*, *Glamour*, and *ESPN* magazines.

Is Tamoxifen Effective In Curing Breast Cancer?

By Camry James

Tamoxifen, known in the trade as Nolvadex, is usually prescribed by specialists in breast cancer and is taken in pill form. A patient will stay on the drug for about five years.

Often the woman's cancer will be tested to see if it is sensitive to the amount of oestrogen in the system. If the cancer is oestrogen sensitive, tamoxifen will be given.

Because tamoxifen is such a weak estrogen, its estrogen signals don't stimulate very much cell growth. And because it has stolen the place away from more powerful estrogen, it blocks estrogen–stimulated cancer cell growth. In this way, tamoxifen acts like an "anti–estrogen."

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Tamoxifen may also take the place of natural estrogen in the receptors of healthy breast cells. In that way it holds down growth activity, and possibly stops abnormal growth and the development of a totally new breast cancer. By blocking natural estrogen from getting to the receptors, tamoxifen is helpful in reducing the risk of breast cancer in women at high risk who have never had breast cancer. It also can help women who have already had breast cancer in one breast by lowering the risk of a new breast cancer forming in the other breast.

One study found that radiation plus tamoxifen was much better than tamoxifen alone at reducing the risk of breast cancer coming back after a lumpectomy in women with hormone–receptor–positive breast cancer. This was true even for women with very small cancers.

For pre–menopausal women, tamoxifen is the best hormonal therapy. But tamoxifen is no longer the first choice for post–menopausal women. If you've been on tamoxifen for two to three years and now you're in menopause, your doctor may recommend that you switch to an aromatase inhibitor to finish your five years of hormonal therapy. However, you can still get a lot of benefit if you take tamoxifen for up to five years and then switch to an aromatase inhibitor.

Tamoxifen was first used to fight breast cancer at the Christie Hospital in Manchester, England, in 1969. It has since proved its worth as means of stopping the spread or recurrence of the disease in women who have already been treated for it.

But, it was noticed back in the early 1980s that some women who were receiving the drug for cancer in one breast did not develop any tumorous growth in the other. This prompted the suggestion that Tamoxifen might have another preventative role for those women who are at risk of getting breast cancer but have yet to develop any signs of the disease.

Tamoxifen has been proven to be the cure to Breast Cancer. We urge you to find out more about Tamoxifen at



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