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Advanced breast cancer: What effect does group therapy have?



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Breast cancer can usually be treated successfully. However, for some women, the cancer spreads despite treatment or it is discovered later after it has already spread. This is called advanced or metastatic breast cancer. Advanced breast cancer involves a lot of pain, demanding treatments and a reduced chance of survival. Each of these pose large psychological challenges.

There are different ways for women to get psychological and social support: one-to-one individual counselling, psychological therapy or education, and group therapy offered by doctors or psychologists and other mental health professionals. It is estimated that less than 1 in 10 women with breast cancer (10%) participate in group therapy. Women with breast cancer also form self-help groups for mutual support.

Researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration wanted to do a systematic review to find out how women with advanced breast cancer fare after any of these psychological and social treatment options. Their search for evidence ended with five trials found. In these trials, a variety of forms of professional group therapy was found, in which about 600 women from Australia, Canada and the USA took part. All were professionally-led groups, not self-help programmes.

The goal of these programmes was to make women's experience with the condition easier, and to offer social support. One of the programmes continued for only a few months, while the others lasted about a year each. Three of the groups also offered additional social support. Two of the programmes included cognitive behaviour therapy. The principle there is to find out which beliefs, thoughts and actions individual people have that might be making it harder for them to cope with their situation. After that, the participants work to change these attitudes, patterns of thoughts and behaviours. Cognitive behaviour therapy has been shown to help with other health problems.

The conclusion of the researchers was that women with advanced breast cancer who participate in group therapy can have improved emotional wellbeing and self-esteem, even though the difference is not very big. Within months of the therapy being over, though, the impact was generally gone. The trials also found that the women who participated in group therapy experienced less pain. The researchers found no evidence that group therapy

participants lived longer than women who did not participate in the programmes.

It is possible that some women benefit more from group therapy than others, and others might be more likely to experience negative emotional impact from them. More research is needed to show if group therapy has any impact on the woman's relationship with her partner, family and doctor.

Glossary

Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

systematic review

Systematic reviews pull together the evidence on a specific question. A systematic review sets out to find all the trials that have put that particular question to the test. The quality of the trials are then evaluated and then results analyzed and explained. Often, the results of trials can then be summarized together through a statistical method called meta-analysis.

Sources

Quelle: Edwards AGK, Hailey S, Maxwell M. Psychological interventions for women with metastatic breast cancer. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue 2 of 2004. (Cochrane Database) (URL:

<http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD004253/frame.html>)

(URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/#>)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **www.informedhealthonline.org**

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