

# Evaluating the Use of Complementary Therapies Amongst Patients Undergoing Radiotherapy in Malta

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## BACKGROUND AND AIMS

Cancer is a complex and life-altering disease that imposes significant multidimensional effects, adversely influencing patients' physical health, emotional wellbeing, and psychological functioning.<sup>1,2</sup>

Complementary therapies (CT) are increasingly being explored by patients with cancer to help manage treatment-related symptoms and improve overall wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> CTs can be used alongside conventional cancer treatment to improve quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Despite their growing popularity, patients' awareness of available CTs in Malta and knowledge informing their willingness to utilise such services is still very limited. The use of CTs may vary depending on several factors, including demographic characteristics such as gender, educational level, or age.

Understanding these aspects is important for healthcare professionals when considering the integration of supportive care services within oncology settings. Therefore, this study was designed to address

three primary objectives: (1) to determine whether patient demographic characteristics influence the utilisation of CTs; (2) to investigate patients' awareness of CTs available locally; and (3) to evaluate patients' willingness to utilise these locally available CTs.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional, non-experimental, prospective descriptive design. A self-designed questionnaire incorporating primarily quantitative items with limited qualitative components was distributed to 140 eligible participants, defined as adult patients undergoing radical radiotherapy. A total of 91 questionnaires were completed and included in the analysis, yielding a response rate of 65%. Data were processed and analysed using IBM SPSS® Statistics version 27 (IBM, Armonk, New York, USA). Statistical analyses included  $\chi^2$ , Kruskal-Wallis, and Friedman tests, used to assess any associations between variables. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

Findings from this study revealed that more than half of the respondents who reported prior use of CTs were female (57.8%). In addition, CT utilisation was most commonly reported among younger patients aged 18–47 years (76.9%). Participants with tertiary-level education also demonstrated the highest use of CTs (82.6%).

Overall, 88% of respondents reported awareness of at least one CT. The most frequently identified therapies were massage (68.1%), followed by yoga (58.2%), dietary supplements (46.2%), and meditation (46.2%).

The majority of participants (95.6%) indicated that they would be willing to utilise CTs if these were

provided free of charge within the hospital setting. Analysis using the Friedman test indicated the strongest agreement with statements, suggesting that a wider range of CTs should be available in Malta (mean score: 4.27) and that greater patient education regarding these therapies is required prior to their use.

## CONCLUSION

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The findings demonstrate high awareness of CTs and a strong willingness amongst patients to utilise these services if made available within the state oncology hospital. CT use was more common among younger and more highly educated patients, and participants expressed support for greater availability of these therapies in Malta. These findings highlight the potential value of integrating CTs into oncology services while improving patient education

to support informed use. Radiographers can lead patient informed discussions and contribute to holistic, supportive care pathways by aiding to integrate CTs in a safe and evidence-based practice.

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