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Hypnosis Cuts Hot Flashes for Breast Cancer Survivors **Patients using the technique saw episodes diminish by 68%, study finds.**

By Steven Reinberg
HealthDay Reporter

THURSDAY, Sept. 25 (HealthDay News) -- Breast cancer survivors who suffer from hot flashes can reduce these attacks significantly with hypnosis, a new study finds.

Hot flashes are a problem for many women who survive breast cancer. Not only do they cause discomfort, but they interrupt sleep, cause anxiety and affect a woman's quality of life.

"This is a very encouraging study of hypnosis as a treatment for hot flashes in breast cancer survivors," said Dr. Ted Gansler, director of Medical Content at the American Cancer Society, who was not involved in the study. "This is an important topic because of the high prevalence of these symptoms in breast cancer survivors, and because few other treatment options are both safe and effective for this population," he added.

There have been some other studies of hypnosis and cancer that indicate that the treatment is useful, but currently underutilized, Gansler noted.



The report was published in the September issue of the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

For the study, researchers led by Gary Elkins, a professor of psychology at Baylor University, randomly assigned 60 breast cancer survivors who suffered from hot flashes to five weekly sessions of either hypnosis or no treatment.

During each session of hypnosis, women were given mental imagery and suggestions for relaxation and coolness. They were also told to disassociate themselves from hot flashes. In addition, they were taught to use positive suggestions and imagery during self-hypnosis.

Women who underwent hypnosis had an average 68 percent decrease in the frequency and severity of hot flashes, the researchers found. In addition, these women said they experienced less anxiety and depression. They also had significant improvements in sleep and their ability to perform daily activities, compared with women who received no treatment.

"Women are interested in alternatives to traditional hormone therapy and pharmacologic interventions, and this study demonstrates the feasibility and potential effectiveness of hypnosis as an alternative treatment," the researchers concluded.

But since the control group received no treatment, it's difficult to say whether some or even all of the improvement represents a "placebo effect," Gansler noted. "However, the researchers reasonably suggest that the improvement is so substantial that it is unlikely to be due entirely to a placebo effect," he said.

Nancy E. Avis, a professor in the department of social sciences and health policy at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, and author of an accompanying journal editorial, agreed that hot flashes are a symptom of cancer treatment that needs to be paid attention to.

"We don't have good interventions for hot flashes," Avis said. "We know that hormone therapy treats hot flashes, but women who have had breast cancer don't want to take hormone therapy," she said.

Many mind-body approaches are promising, Avis said. "The hypnosis study has impressive results, but we need more research," she said. "Based on these small studies, we are not ready to say they work."

Avis believes alternative approaches such as hypnosis are appealing to a lot of women. Many other approaches such as meditation and yoga are available at cancer centers, she noted.

"There is no reason to think they are not safe," Avis said. "The advice is -- try it -- there is no harm in trying. As long as you do it with somebody who knows what they're doing, there are no downsides," she said.

More information

For more on breast cancer, visit the [American Cancer Society](#).

SOURCES: Nancy E. Avis, Ph.D., professor, Department of Social Sciences and Health Policy, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, N.C.; Ted Gansler, M.D., director, Medical Content, American Cancer Society, Atlanta; September 2008, *Journal of Clinical Oncology*

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