Palliative Care Improves Quality of Life

Palliative care is a special type of medical care. It’s designed to ease the discomfort and stress of living with a serious or life-threatening illness, such as cancer or a heart condition. Two new NIH-funded studies add to growing evidence that palliative care can improve quality of life.

Palliative care works along with other therapies to ease physical symptoms and offer emotional and social support to patients and caregivers. It differs from hospice, or end-of-life care, which is offered to those whose illness is unlikely to be cured.

In one study, researchers followed 160 patients who were hospitalized for weeks while undergoing a bone marrow transplant to treat cancer. Bone marrow transplants are difficult procedures that can lead to both physical and emotional distress. The patients were randomly assigned to receive either standard medical care or palliative care plus standard care.

After 2 weeks in the hospital, when treatment can be most difficult, patients who had palliative care reported less symptoms, a smaller drop in quality of life, and less depression and anxiety than those who had standard care. Patients who received palliative care also reported some improvements after 3 months.

In a related study, researchers reviewed 43 studies of palliative care. The analysis included nearly 13,000 adults with serious illness and more than 2,400 of their caregivers. The research team found that palliative care improved quality of life and symptoms, but not survival.

“We need to find ways of integrating palliative care concepts in patients’ usual care experiences so it isn’t a luxury, but a standard part of health care for those living with serious illness,” says team leader Dr. Dio Kavalieratos of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Further work will be needed to study the costs and long-term benefits of different types of palliative care.

References


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