

Unconventional methods in cancer patients: prevalence and patterns of use in European countries.

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Objective. To systematically review the existing survey data on the use of unconventional methods (UCM) among European cancer patients.

Design. Systematic examination and analysis of 53 surveys published between 1979 and 2003 comprising over 17000 cancer patients.

Main measures. Data concerning sampling methodology, information on accrued, included, and participating patients, sociodemographic-/disease-related data, information on construction and content of the questionnaire, number of patients using UCM, types of unconventional methods, time period, duration and frequency of use, data on subjective experiences of the patients, on cost & expenditures, on sources of information, and on communication issues were collected, compared and summarized.

Results. The surveys originated from Austria (8), Denmark (1), Finland (3), France (1), Germany (14), Italy (1), Israel (1), Sweden (3), Switzerland (6), Netherlands (3), Norway (3), Turkey (2), UK (7). Twenty-eight were published before 1998. The reported prevalence of UCM use ranged among 9% - 91%. Ten surveys provided data on point prevalence. The most frequently reported UCMs belonged were diets, dietary changes and/or nutritional supplements. Two thirds of the surveys provided information on the source of recommendation, 40% on patients' satisfaction, one quarter on costs and one fifth on perceived negative effects.

Conclusions. Although over 50 studies surveying the use of UCM in European cancer patients had been published over the last 25 years, it is so far not possible to draw a "European" picture of it. Nevertheless, we are able to provide data for testing hypotheses on factors contributing to the heterogeneity of the data.

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