

# Symptom Distress and Its Association With Traditional Chinese Medicine Use in Chinese American Women With Cancer

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**T**he Chinese American population, comprising 26% of the Asian American population, is about 3.8 million, according to the 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Half of all Chinese Americans in the United States live in California or New York. New York City has multiple Chinatowns and the largest metropolitan Chinese population outside of Asia (McCabe, 2012), and Chinese immigrants continue to move to New York City (McCabe, 2012). Because this is a growing population with possible unique healthcare needs, understanding these needs through investigations is important.

Chinese Americans have been reported to be particularly vulnerable to poorer health, given their limited language skills (Yi, Swartz, & Reyes-Gibby, 2011) and the diversity of the group, which is differentially affected by cultural, socioeconomic, legal, and political determinants (Derose, Escarce, & Lurie, 2007). One area of health disparities research in the Chinese American community is cancer. Patients with cancer experience a variety of symptoms as a result of their disease and treatment for that disease. Multiple symptoms, including fatigue, severe nausea and vomiting, depression, and pain, have been reported in patients who are in treatment for various cancers (Cleeland et al., 2013; Gwede, Small, Munster, Andrykowski, & Jacobsen, 2008; Liu, Ercolano, Siefert, & McCorkle, 2010). These symptoms have a profound negative influence on physical, psychosocial, and spiritual well-being (Wu & Harden, 2014). Understanding the symptom experience of patients with cancer is vital because it enables clinicians to systematically evaluate the quality of life of patients with cancer. Until now, very limited cancer research has been conducted on Chinese Americans in New York City. In addition, the symptomatology and symptom management in Chinese Americans with cancer are particularly poorly understood.

One common strategy for symptom management in Chinese American patients with cancer is the use of

**Purpose/Objectives:** To identify symptom distress related to cancer for a group of Chinese American women in treatment, and to examine their use of various forms of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and their relationships to specific symptoms they identified.

**Design:** Cross-sectional, correlational.

**Setting:** American Cancer Society Asian Initiatives support groups in the state of New York.

**Sample:** 97 Chinese American women residing in New York with a mean age of 57 years; the time since diagnosis of cancer ranged from two months to 24 years. The type of diagnosis for the majority of women was breast cancer.

**Methods:** A self-reported questionnaire including a demographic data form, a researcher-developed checklist for types of TCM, and the Memorial Symptom Assessment Scale Short Form (MSAS-SF) were administered. The MSAS-SF has three subscales: global distress index, psychological symptom distress scale, and physical symptom distress scale.

**Main Research Variables:** Symptoms, symptom distress, and types of TCM. The descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U tests were applied for data analysis.

**Findings:** Chinese American women with cancer in treatment reported multiple symptoms, and the three MSAS-SF distress subscale scores indicated moderate symptom distress. Symptoms were positively associated with the use of TCM.

**Conclusions:** Chinese American women in treatment for cancer reported multiple symptoms and moderate symptom distress. Participants with specific symptoms tended to use specific forms of TCM.

**Implications for Nursing:** High prevalence of psychological symptoms for Chinese American women with cancer suggests that oncology nurses should work with mental health providers for symptom management of this population. Oncology nurses also need to stay informed of the growing body of evidence on the benefits of TCM for patients with cancer. Future studies should include an emphasis on the improvement in methodologic quality for studies that investigate using TCM in participants with cancer.

**Key Words:** Chinese American women; cancer; symptom; symptom distress; traditional Chinese medicine

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