



PROVIDING EFFECTIVE,  
WHOLISTIC TREATMENTS  
TO A NEW CLIENTELE IN A  
SAFE ENVIRONMENT

# ONCOLOGY ESTHETICS:

## Taking Skin Care and Spa Therapies to a New Level

### ONCOLOGY ESTHETICS IS THE FIELD WITHIN THE

broad scope of the esthetics industry defined as the specialty that provides skin care services to cancer patients while they are undergoing treatment therapies or recovering in a spa or hospital environment. It includes palliative care—relieving cancer symptoms without effecting a cure, which lightens the pain and other distressing symptoms of anti-cancer therapies, and integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of treatment. Oncology esthetics is a rewarding area of specialization that can help skin care and spa professionals expand their clientele.

The concept of treating cancer patients with skin care and spa therapies developed due to the public's influence, an increased focus in complementary medicine and most importantly, at the request of cancer patients themselves. Traditionally, state board esthetics schools do not provide any education in oncology to their students and strongly discourage treating cancer patients. According to conventional wisdom, a client requesting treatment at a spa who discloses a history of cancer should be politely turned down by the skin care or spa professional.

Oncology esthetics is a complex field. Skin care and spa professionals must have formal education and training to be able to safely provide treatments to a cancer patient. This client population is living longer, and as a result they are using supplemental therapies to enhance

their wellbeing and quality of life. The field of oncology esthetics is designed to provide an additional form of healing to people living with cancer. The goal is to offer skin care and spa therapies that may help relieve the negative side effects of anti-cancer treatments in an environment that is safe for both the patient and therapist.

### Oncology esthetics training

Conventional physicians usually advise their cancer patients not to undergo esthetics treatments due to the lack of specialized education and training in the field. Weak preparation—including failure to provide clear and concise information regarding safe spa treatments, the questions patients should be asking their skin care therapist and what to expect from the treatment—continues to be one of the largest obstacles physicians face with the matter.

With valid and reliable training being provided by licensed oncology personnel and advanced esthetics licensed therapists, the hope is that the medical community will begin to acknowledge the benefits that oncology esthetics can offer the person living with cancer. With credible training through a specialized educational program, the medical community is beginning to recognize that the clients' safety is the primary concern of the field's therapists. The aim is to encourage esthetics treatments as an additional form of therapy to help ease the disease's effects on the skin. ➔

BY MORAG CURRIN AND ROXANNE PARKER



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Esthetics is defined as a “pleasing appearance or effect,” particularly to the sense of sight. For skin care and spa professionals, that means analyzing the skin condition and providing therapeutic treatments with the use of products and/or equipment to reach satisfactory results. Cancer therapies, particularly chemotherapy, present numerous skin conditions because of their toxicity to the body, with many manifestations on the skin. Therefore, oncology esthetics professionals are qualified to recognize related side effects and tailor the treatments accordingly. The field consists of specialists in the medical community who can recognize the demand for a spa treatment from their patients and support their requests.

### Wholistic approach

Oncology esthetics training covers topics including how to define cancer, how it develops, the process of the disease, who it affects, the various types of cancers, how they are treated and how the condition affects the client from the inside out. The way that cancer therapies can independently and simultaneously affect the client—physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically and mentally—is covered. It is not only the skin that is being dealt with in the spa environment, but the whole person. Therapists are not equipped to deal with a person that is undergoing cancer therapy unless they have a complete understanding of the process, as each individual has their own set of issues.

Every client must be addressed as a unique individual—oncology skin care and spa professionals continually face new challenges and are required to allow more time and effort to provide the safest treatment program. Education plays a major role, as oncology is a field that is constantly changing. Research is underway to find safer and more effective procedures through evidence-based practice, including softer treatment options.

### A clinical eye

Many abnormalities characteristic of skin cancer are a result of increased exposure to the sun. Through education and training, skin care and spa professionals can obtain a greater understanding of these abnormalities to help them differentiate between cancerous and benign lesions.

While licensed therapists in the oncology esthetics field are bound by the scope of their licensing and are not able to diagnose skin abnormalities and diseases, they do play a vitally important and supportive role to physicians. They are able to recognize pre-cancerous lesions on the skin such as actinic keratosis and superficial cancers such as basal cell carcinomas and squamous cell carcinomas. Even more importantly, they recognize any melanomas on the skin, putting the urgency on addressing the condition without alarming the client. Therapeutic skin treatments that utilize equipment and/or products can provide benefits

that help prevent skin cancers from developing. The esthetician who is educated, trained and certified in oncology esthetics becomes an important part of the health care team that looks after the cancer patient.

### Therapeutic massage

Massage, a form of touch therapy, is known to “unlock” clients’ stress response pattern, often resulting in the revelation of various emotions, mostly verbal. If clients are mentally or emotionally fragile, one is unable to predict the clients’ behavior and response. Therefore esthetics treatments may be contraindicated. Each cancer client must be handled on a case by case basis, as no one protocol or procedure can apply to every person.

Oncology estheticians perform massage primarily on the face, neck and décolleté area. Today, evidence-based studies and anecdotes have proven that massage provides therapeutic benefits. Unpleasant symptoms it can ease include:

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- Stress, tension and difficulties relaxing
- Psychological distress, e.g. anxiety, panic, low mood/depression
- Physical symptoms, e.g. pain, nausea, breathlessness
- Adjustment to a different/ changing body
- Sleep disturbance
- Side effects of chemotherapy on health and skin
- Anything else that affects quality of life such as fatigue, feelings of despair, etc.

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It is extremely important to know how to handle various issues while conducting an oncology esthetics massage, such as the placement of ports, central lines and lymph nodes in the breast and underarm area. The therapist must also be knowledgeable on the proper direction of movement and the adequate amount of pressure to use. Many additional challenges may apply, depending on the medications the client is taking and how they are responding to treatment.



Anti-cancer treatments greatly affect the cuticles—although no nipping can be done, they can be gently massaged.

### Why offer esthetics treatments?

Stress plays a very large role in the life of the cancer patient. Over time, stress may weaken the immune system, which can negatively affect overall health. Worry can increase or prolong the effects of the disease in the physical, mental and spiritual realms.

If the cancer client is feeling insecure, unattractive or isolated as a result of cancer treatments, a form of touch therapy can be soothing, relaxing and nurturing. It gives them hope and encouragement and helps them to feel better about themselves. A certain sense of despair is experienced by many people undergoing cancer therapies, as they represent their fight for survival. Feelings of fear are profound, and the treatment side effects compound their distress.

A service performed by an educated skin care and spa oncology esthetician with a comprehensive understanding of the disease is reassuring to the client population. They believe they are in capable hands, which gives them a strong sense of relief and comfort, and can enhance their spirits through the healing touch.

Keep in mind that cost can prevent cancer patients from seeking esthetics treatments. Oncology estheticians are therefore encouraged to research community organizations and other groups within the skin care and spa industry that fund the costs of esthetic procedures for people with cancer.

### Wide ranging services

The spa treatments that oncology estheticians can provide are numerous. Therapeutic facials address the face, neck and décolleté areas to soothe any side effects and can help rebuild and revitalize the skin. Makeup applications can use camouflage to cover up any color or texture abnormalities. However, the skin itself needs to be taken care of first before makeup is applied.

Makeup application skills can be taught to the client. Oncology estheticians can offer eyebrow restoration to clients who have lost their hair due to anti-cancer therapies. They can also teach the client how to recreate natural looking eyebrows that enhance their looks instead of unnatural looking ones that look odd. Lips should be kept moisturized and supple with lip balm.

Other complementary spa treatments that may support the cancer client include reflexology and meridian therapy, acupuncture, Vichy shower, full body oncology massage therapy, warm stone therapy, sound therapy, movement therapy, biofeedback Reiki and touch therapy.

### Head to toe

Once the hair is completely gone due to anti-cancer treatments, a scalp massage can be very therapeutic. Assistance with a variation of wigs, hair coverings and scarves can be offered as a complementary service for the client.

Natural manicures and pedicures—no nail painting, artificial nails or aggressive treatments—provide cleansing, relaxation, moisturizing and protective benefits. Anti-cancer treatments greatly affect the cuticles—although no nipping can be done, they can be gently massaged.

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Maintaining a close to sterile environment is especially important when providing esthetics treatments to cancer patients, as they may still have a weak immune system.



Proper product selection for cancer patients is critical. Education on skin care products geared towards cancer patients can help oncology estheticians direct patients in choosing items that create a positive effect on their skin that may restore, soothe and aid in the healing process. Choose product formulations that are simple yet effective, and have been designed with sensitive skin in mind. Be sure they have no fragrances or irritating ingredients while including elements that support and restore the skin to its original vitality. The latter is especially important for cancer patients, as there are numerous skin conditions that result from cancer treatment that leave the skin anywhere from dry to raw and sloughing off.

### Sanitation and infection control

Protocols and procedures within the spa environment are implemented to ensure that treatments are carried out in a hygienic manner. Strict adherence to these policies ensures a safe practice on the part of the therapist. Clean and bleached linens, disinfected stations, countertops and products, proper disposable implements, rooms with sufficient ventilation, adequate hand washing techniques and sanitation and disinfection of equipment are all essential. Maintaining a close to sterile environment is especially important when providing esthetics treatments to cancer patients, as they may still have a weak immune system.

### Focus on the client

One key role the oncology esthetician plays is that of a good listener. The therapist must be attentive to the client's needs but they must not try to play doctor or nurse. Rather, they should remain positive and support a strong and healthy recovery with the help of the skin care and spa services. The oncology esthetics professional is an integrated part of the team whose members all share the same objective: protect the patient and put them first at all times. ■

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