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Ayurveda In Supportive Oncology: A Comparative & Holistic Perspective

Upadhyay A.¹, Pradhan R.², Deolia V.³

1. PG Scholar, Dept. of Kriya Sharir, Govt. (Auto.) Ayurveda College & Hospital, Gwalior, (MP)
2. Professor & H.O.D Dept. of Kriya Sharir, Govt. (Auto.) Ayurveda College & Hospital, Gwalior, (MP)
3. Reader & HOD Dept. of Panchkarma, Govt. (Auto.) Ayurveda College & Hospital, Gwalior, (MP)

Abstract:

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide, posing complex challenges that extend beyond physical illness to encompass emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. While conventional therapies such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy, and targeted biological agents have improved survival rates, they often result in debilitating side effects and diminished quality of life. This has driven global interest toward integrative approaches that address the patient holistically. Ayurveda, India's ancient system of medicine, offers a personalized, whole-system framework aimed at restoring balance among the Doshas, enhancing immunity, detoxifying the body, and promoting overall vitality (Ojas). Classical Ayurvedic descriptions of Arbuda and Granthi align with many clinical features of cancer, and therapies such as Panchakarma, Rasayana, herbal formulations, yoga, meditation, and diet modification have shown potential in managing treatment-related side effects, improving psychological well-being, and supporting long-term recovery. This review synthesizes classical Ayurvedic concepts, modern research, and integrative strategies for post-surgical and post-chemotherapy cancer care, highlighting Ayurveda's role as a supportive component alongside modern oncology.

Keywords: Cancer, Ayurveda, Arbuda, Granthi, Panchakarma, Rasayana, Integrative Oncology, Yoga, Herbal Medicine, Immunity, Post-chemotherapy Care, Holistic Healing

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Ayushi Upadhyay,

PG Scholar Dept. of Kriya Sharir,

Govt. (Auto.) Ayurveda College & Hospital, Gwalior, (MP)

Contact Number: 9425707074 Email: ayushiupadhyaypip@gmail.com



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INTRODUCTION:

Cancer is not merely a disease of uncontrolled cell growth—it is a life-altering condition that disrupts the very foundation of an individual's physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Globally, cancer remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality, with millions of new cases diagnosed each year. While advancements in modern medicine—such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, surgery, and targeted biological agents—have significantly improved survival rates and tumor control, these treatments often bring with them a host of debilitating side effects. Common complications include chronic fatigue, hair loss, digestive disturbances, neuropathic pain, immune suppression, depression, and anxiety, which can severely affect a patient's quality of life, resilience, and treatment compliance. The psychosocial burden of cancer is equally profound. The disease can lead to social withdrawal, existential distress, and disruption of familial and occupational roles. Conventional medicine, while powerful in targeting cancer cells, often lacks a comprehensive strategy to address these broader dimensions of the patient experience. This has led to an increasing global interest in integrative and complementary therapies that can support healing at multiple levels.

In this context, *Ayurveda*, India's classical system of medicine that dates back over 3,000 years, offers a uniquely holistic framework. Rooted in the *Vedic Philosophy*, *Ayurveda* views health as a dynamic balance of the three biological forces (*Doshas*—*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*), the digestive fire (*Agni*), bodily tissues (*Dhatus*), waste elimination systems (*Malas*), and the mind (*Manas*). Rather than treating the disease in isolation, *Ayurvedic* healing focuses on restoring the natural balance within the body, strengthening immunity, detoxifying the system, calming

the mind, and enhancing *vitality* (*Ojas*). This personalized, whole-system approach makes *Ayurveda* particularly suitable as a supportive care model for cancer patients. Over the past two decades, numerous cancer centers and researchers across the world have begun exploring *Ayurveda* as part of an integrative oncology model. *Ayurvedic* interventions such as *Rasayana therapy* (rejuvenation), *Panchakarma* (cleansing), *yoga*, *meditation*, *pranayama*, *sattvic diet*, *herbal remedies*, and *lifestyle modifications* are being increasingly used to manage cancer-related symptoms, reduce toxicity from chemotherapy and radiation, improve psychological well-being, and enhance quality of life.

Ayurvedic Perspective:

From the *Ayurvedic* viewpoint, as described by *Charaka* and *Sushruta*, cancer is understood as a type of swelling—either inflammatory or non-inflammatory—that corresponds to the conditions known as *Arbuda* (tumors) and *Granthi* (cystic or glandular swellings). *Ayurveda* does not identify cancer as a distinct disease category; rather, it sees all illnesses, including cancer, as manifestations of deep-rooted imbalances in the *Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*). When these disturbed *Doshas* interact with weakened bodily tissues (*Dhatus*), they give rise to specific diseases. Although classical *Ayurvedic* texts do not directly name cancer, the clinical features described under *Granthi* and *Arbuda* closely parallel various cancer types and their associated symptoms.

Ayurveda, which relies on natural substances for its healing practices, describes various conditions in ancient texts—such as *Apachi*, *Gulma*, *Granthi*, and *Arbuda*—that bear clinical resemblance to cancer. These terms represent symptoms and pathological states that align with the characteristics of malignancies observed today.

Materials and Methods:

This information is derived from a combination of classical *Ayurvedic* scriptures, contemporary scientific literature, peer-reviewed journals, and online resources.

DISCUSSION:**Pathogenesis (Samprapti):**

The Ayurvedic explanation of cancer is rooted in the theory of **Doshas**—*Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*. Disease arises when there is a disruption or imbalance among these bio-energies.

- **Vata**, the dynamic *Dosha*, is believed to facilitate the spread or metastasis of cancer cells.
- **Pitta**, associated with heat and metabolism (*Tejas*), contributes to the rapid and abnormal metabolic activity of cancerous cells.
- **Kapha**, being heavy and dense, is responsible for the uncontrolled cellular proliferation and mass formation.

The imbalance, especially when *Vata* combines with disturbed *Kapha*, results in pathological changes in **Mamsa Dhatu** (muscle tissue). This leads to the formation of

a solid, deep-seated, slowly expanding mass that is generally round, mildly painful, and non-suppurative (does not form pus), characteristics often observed in tumor growths.

Types of Arbuda Based on Dosha Predominance:

1. *Vataja Arbuda*
2. *Pittaja Arbuda*
3. *Kaphaja Arbuda*

Types Based on Affected Dhatus (Tissues):

1. **Raktarbuda** – Originating from blood tissue
2. **Mamsarbuda** – Originating from muscle tissue
3. **Medoarbuda** – Originating from adipose (fat) tissue.

Trigger Factors and Nature of Arbuda:

The development of *Arbuda* can be initiated by factors such as trauma or localized irritation. For instance, if a muscle is impacted by a blow or injury, the vitiated tissue may form a firm, immobile, tumor-like swelling. This type of growth, called *Mamsarbuda*, is usually unpainful, greasy (unctuous), and similar in color to surrounding skin—and is considered incurable in classical *Ayurveda*.

Certain types of *Arbuda* are also seen as especially dangerous and untreatable, such as:

- Those that secrete excessively,
 - Those situated in vital organs or near critical physiological pathways,
 - Tumors that are immovable or recur.
- Additionally:
- **Adhyarbuda** refers to a secondary tumor forming over an existing one.
 - **Dvirarbuda** indicates tumors that arise simultaneously or follow an earlier growth. Both of these are classified as incurable in *Ayurvedic texts*.

Due to the influence of *Kapha* and *Medas*, these growths tend to be solid and

non-suppurative, reflecting the classical view that malignant tumors do not produce pus.

Types Based on Prognosis:

1. **Sadhya (Curable)**
2. **Asadhya (Incurable)**

A thorough clinical evaluation, including a detailed history and physical examination, is crucial in understanding the nature and progression of the disease. The duration of symptoms can help determine whether the condition is acute or chronic. A review of the patient's past medical history may uncover pre-existing conditions that could influence both the choice of treatment and potential side effects. The social history might reveal lifestyle factors—such as smoking, alcohol consumption, or occupational exposure to carcinogens—that can contribute to disease progression or complicate treatment outcomes. Additionally, a family history suggesting a genetic predisposition to cancer can help identify at-risk relatives. In such cases, preventive measures or regular screenings may be recommended for unaffected family members, particularly siblings.

Ayurvedic Approach in Cancer Patients:

Following cancer surgery or chemotherapy, patients often face significant physical and psychological challenges, such as depleted tissues, compromised immunity, digestive imbalances, emotional distress, and lingering toxicity. *Ayurveda* provides a holistic path for recovery, focusing on restoring *Agni* (digestive fire), enhancing *Ojas* (vital energy), and rebalancing the *Tridoshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*). Post-cancer Ayurvedic management emphasizes the use of *Panchakarma* (cleansing therapies), *Rasayana* (rejuvenation), *Yoga* and *Meditation*, and the administration of both compound and single-herb formulations.

Panchakarma:

Mild Detoxification and Recovery Support:

In the initial recovery phase after chemotherapy or surgery, strong *Panchakarma Therapies* are generally avoided until the patient regains basic vitality. Gentle external treatments such as *Abhyanga* (therapeutic oil massage) and *Swedana* (mild steam therapy) are preferred. This helps ease pain, promote lymphatic flow, improve circulation, and calm the nervous system. Medicated oils like *Bala Taila* or *Jatyadi Taila* are typically used for their regenerative and nourishing effects.

Once digestion becomes stable, internal cleansing practices like *Virechana* (therapeutic purgation) may be introduced, particularly in patients with dominant *Pitta* or *Kapha* conditions. This helps in eliminating residual toxins and supporting liver function. In individuals with aggravated *Vata* or symptoms such as constipation and neuropathy, *Basti* (medicated enemas) prepared from herbs like *Dashamoola* or *Kshira* (milk-based) are used to restore gut health and enhance immunity. More intense procedures such as *Vamana* (emesis) and *Raktamokshana* (bloodletting) are typically postponed until the patient is much stronger and must only be done under strict medical guidance.

Rasayana Therapy: Rebuilding Strength and Immunity

Rasayana therapy is central to *Ayurvedic* post-cancer treatment, aiming to rejuvenate the body, enhance resistance to disease, and prevent relapse. These formulations are introduced once appetite and digestion are stable.

Tonic preparations like *Chyawanprash* boost immunity and act as powerful antioxidants. *Ashwagandha* is frequently used to manage fatigue and support strength, while *Guduchi* (*Tinospora cordifolia*) aids in detoxifying the liver and supporting immune cell function. *Swarna Bhasma* (purified gold ash), known for its immuno-enhancing qualities, may be

recommended in minimal doses under specialist supervision. For gut healing and regular bowel movement, *Triphala Ghrita* (medicated ghee) is commonly advised.

These therapies not only revitalize the body but also help alleviate side effects of cancer treatments such as anemia, reduced appetite, exhaustion, and nerve-related discomfort.

Yoga and Meditation: Restoring Mental and Physical Balance: Mental well-being is a key component of healing in *Ayurveda*. Cancer survivors often face anxiety, insomnia, depression, and fear of recurrence. *Yoga, meditation, and pranayama* are therefore integral in the recovery plan.

1. **Physical Benefits:**

- Asanas like *Tadasana, Vrikshasana, Setu Bandhasana*, and *Shavasana* help reduce fatigue, improve mobility, and strengthen the musculoskeletal system.

2. **Psychological and Emotional Support:**

- Pranayama (*Anulom Vilom, Bhramari*) and meditation (*Om chanting, Yoga Nidra*) alleviate stress, anxiety, depression, and improve coping mechanisms.

3. **Clinical Outcomes:**

- *Yoga* interventions have shown improvements in sleep quality, reduction in chemotherapy-induced nausea, and enhanced emotional well-being.

Herbal Medicines and Single-Drug Remedies:

Ayurvedic formulations are widely used to address specific issues that arise during recovery. For instance, *Yashtimadhu* decoction is effective for relieving oral mucositis, while teas made from *Shunthi* (dry ginger) and *Dhania* (coriander) are beneficial for managing chemotherapy-related nausea. Herbs like *Guduchi, Punarnava Mandura*, and *Ashwagandha* support immune function, help in combating anemia, and improve muscle tone. *Kanchanara* used for glandular

swellings and tumors (*Arbuda, Granthi*), can be supportive in thyroid and lymph node-related cancers. It performs lekhana karma. *Haridra* (turmeric) is known for its anti-inflammatory and cancer-sensitizing properties. *Amla* (*Emblica officinalis*) provides high antioxidant support and enhances blood formation and digestion. *Shatavari* is especially useful for female reproductive health and mucosal restoration, while *Pippali* (long pepper) increases nutrient absorption and supports respiratory health.

Swarna Bhasma:

Actions: *Rasayana*, immunomodulator, antineoplastic potential

- Shown cytotoxic effects on cancer cells in vitro.
- Enhances immune function and acts as an adjuvant therapy.

Diet and Daily Lifestyle:

A wholesome, nourishing diet is essential to support healing. Light, freshly cooked meals such as khichari, red rice porridge, and sautéed seasonal vegetables with ghee, along with herbal teas made from cumin, coriander, and fennel, are highly recommended. Cold, processed, reheated, or stale foods should be avoided, as they can weaken digestion and immunity. Maintaining a structured daily routine (*Dinacharya*) is vital. Going to bed early, getting morning sunlight exposure, staying hydrated, having regular bowel movements, and engaging in mild physical activity all contribute to faster and more stable recovery.

CONCLUSION:

The post-surgical and post-chemotherapy stage plays a critical role in a cancer patient's healing journey. *Ayurveda*, with its time-tested principles of detoxification (*Panchakarma*), rejuvenation (*Rasayana*), mind-body integration (through *Yoga and Meditation*), and natural herbal remedies,

provides a comprehensive and integrative path to long-term recovery. When combined carefully with modern oncological care and guided by experienced practitioners, *Ayurvedic* therapies can significantly enhance quality of life, boost immunity, and reduce the risk of cancer recurrence.

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