Animal-Assisted Activity Among Patients With Cancer: Effects on Mood, Fatigue, Self-Perceived Health, and Sense of Coherence

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Purpose/Objectives: To identify to what extent an animal-assisted activity (i.e., visits with a dog) affects the mood, self-perceived health, and sense of coherence among patients undergoing radiation therapy.

Design: Pretest/post-test between and within groups.

Setting: Radiation oncology units of two hospitals in a mid-sized, midwestern city.

Sample: 30 adult patients undergoing nonpalliative radiation therapy.

Methods: After giving informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to receive 12 dog visits, 12 human visits, or 12 quiet reading sessions over a four-week period.

Findings: No statistically significant differences were found; however, compared with others their age, patients receiving dog visits viewed their health as improved over the four-week period. Participants described each of the three activities as beneficial. The study is primarily useful as a basis for planning additional research.

Implications for Nursing: Patients may want and express benefit from animal-assisted activity dog visits, but the outcomes of the visits may not be measureable. Nurses should assess to what extent patients believe that such visits are beneficial by asking them. The visits may be valued by patients as helping to relieve their anxiety and as distractions from their disease and therapy.

Key Points . . .

➤ No statistically significant association was found between dog visits and mood, sense of coherence, or self-perceived health.
➤ Participants perceived visit and reading sessions as helping to decrease their anxiety and to provide distractions.
➤ Participants recommended visits or reading sessions to other patients early in the radiation therapy process.

Animal-Assisted Activity

Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, and Sevedge (2003) argued that animal-assisted activity (AAA) (i.e., pet visitation) meets...