

BREAKING NEWS

Battling Cancer

By: [Peter Jaret](#) | Source: From the AARP Bulletin print edition | April 1, 2010

A Leap of Faith

Fifteen years ago, after undergoing a radical mastectomy, Ann Fonfa began prowling medical libraries and slipping into medical conferences in search of complementary or alternative treatments for breast cancer. “At the time, there was no one place to go for information,” recalls Fonfa, 60. “Most of the doctors I talked to thought I was crazy.” But Fonfa discovered stacks of information about many therapies that lay outside mainstream medicine. To share what she’d found, she created the Annie Appleseed Project, a nonprofit clearinghouse for information about unconventional approaches to cancer.

Ten years old this year, the project’s website—www.annieappleseedproject.org—logs more than 85,000 hits a month, making it one of the leading sources of information about the disease on the Internet. Links to the site appear on hundreds of other sites, from the Cancer Information and Support Network to the California Breast Cancer Research Program—a measure of the respect Fonfa has won among leaders in the field. When she isn’t updating the site, she speaks at national conferences, nudging mainstream scientists to expand research into the potential benefits of unconventional therapies.

“I’m a great believer in scientific evidence,” says Fonfa. “But it’s very hard to get studies funded, especially studies that aren’t looking at a blockbuster drug. Most of the time there isn’t very good evidence yet. But people with cancer can’t wait for the perfect study to be done.”

On her own quest, Fonfa tried dietary supplements and several nutritional regimens, among other unconventional therapies. Today she is cancer-free. Still, she is the first to acknowledge that she has no way of knowing if the therapies she tried are the reason she's alive today. "You try to learn everything you can. And then you make a leap of faith."

Under the Microscope

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of NIH, is conducting research into a variety of therapies that might help cancer patients. Studies are typically funded after clinical evidence suggests a treatment shows promise. Currently under investigation:

European mistletoe Already widely used in Europe, this plant is being tested in conjunction with the chemotherapy drug gemcitabine in patients with pancreatic, lung, colorectal and breast cancer.

Electroacupuncture This therapy shows promise as a treatment for nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy.

Yoga May be beneficial as a treatment for persistent fatigue in breast cancer patients.

Pancreatic enzyme therapy Being tested in patients with pancreatic cancer.

Reiki/energy healing This popular therapy is being tested in patients with prostate cancer.

Vegetable/herbal supplements For use in patients with lung cancer.

For more on therapies being used, go to bulletin.aarp.org.