An Evidence-Based Study of Curative and Clinical Effects of Intercession on Diseases: An Updated Systematic Review

Mansoureh Masoudi¹, Milad Saiedi²*

¹Valiasr Eghlid hospital, Shiraz University of medical sciences, Shiraz, Iran
²student of medicine, international Pardis University of Yazd, Yazd, Iran

*Corresponding author: Milad Saiedi, student of medicine, international Pardis University of Yazd, Yazd, Iran

ABSTRACT

Background: Intercessory prayer (intercession) is an ancient intervention applied with the aim of easing morbidity and health improvement. It is practiced by many faiths and involves a person or group setting time aside to petition God on behalf of another who is in some kind of need.

Objectives: This systematic review is aimed to overview curative and clinical effect of Prayer on different diseases.

Methods: This review article was carried out by searching studies in PubMed, Medline, Web of Science, and IranMedex databases. The initial search strategy identified about 123 references. In this study, 65 studies was accepted for further screening and met all our inclusion criteria (in English, full text, and dated mainly from the year 1992 to 2016). The search terms were “Complementary and Alternative Therapies, prayer, Intercessory prayer, curative Effect”.

Result: the result of this systematic review show the curative samples of intercessory prayer, with one study in each of different categories of outcome. We provide a critical analysis of the clinical aspect of such a research rather than its philosophical dimensions. The findings of this study include only the cases of positive effect of Prayer on human as well as nonhuman species. instead, It was shown that prayer has clinical effect in many diseases including Infertility, Wound healing, cardiovascular disease, Rheumatoid arthritis, Bloodstream infection, Depression and anxiety, Cystic fibrosis, Kidney dialysis, General anesthesia, Alcohol abuse, Psychiatric conditions, Impaired auditory, hearing and/or vision, Cancer, Spinal surgery, HIV, WART, Pregnancy, Pulmonary diseases, Chronic
diseases. In addition, Intercession also showed decrease length of hospital stay and duration of fever in septic patients, increase immune function.

Conclusions: In this study, curative and clinical Effect of intercession on different diseases were presented using published articles in scientific sites. Besides, the concept of intercessory prayer, different forms of prayer, literature concerning efficacy of clinical trials and non-clinical trials were reviewed. It was concluded that the potential power of faith in healing of many diseases was observed. Although some reviews or meta-analysis stated null or small therapeutic effect, further clinical un-biased studies are still required to deny or confirm its effectiveness.

Keywords: Complementary and Alternative Therapies, prayer, intercession, curative effect

INTRODUCTION

Background

There are different types of treatment in complementary and alternative medicine from ancient times, including herbal therapy, Acupuncture, Hypnosis, Homeopathy, Naturopathy, Massage therapy, Yoga, diet therapy, Ayurveda, Reiki, Qigong, Meditation, spiritual therapy, etc.[1-24].

Religious practices have been associated with health improvement for millennia. People pray for both physical and mental healing. Prayer is amongst the most popular interventions intending illness alleviation and good health promotion [25].

Mechanism of action of prayer may be through one or more of several mechanisms including meditation, the placebo response, regression to the mean, the natural course of different diseases, nonspecific emotional support, the Hawthorne effect, the Rosenthal effect as well as divine intervention [26, 27].

Prayer was defined as an active process of intercommunicating with and questing to a higher sapient and divine power [28]. There are different forms of prayer applied as spiritual treatment modalities including: A] conversational prayer that is informal conversation with God about day-to-day matters, seeking guidance and counsel, or expressing gratitude for life and wellbeing; B] meditative prayer, that is the divine relationship to mankind; C] ritual prayer that is well known prayers reciting or d] intercessory prayer or distant healing, characterized by petitions on behalf of others for their health and wellbeing[29].

Within the act of Intercession, one pleads with God for his/her needs and the needs of others [30]. Intercessory prayer is one of popular interventions intend to illness ease and good health promotion. It is practiced by many faiths and involves a person or group setting time aside to petition God on behalf of another who is in some kind of need [31-33]. As intercession is one of the most frequently used spiritual practice, it is beneficial to review its curative effect in treatment of different diseases [34].

Religion is a source of comfort to some and conflict to others [4]. Prayer is an ancient healing practice not generally available in our health care system [35] as Physicians rarely ask patients about their religious beliefs [36]. Strong evidence of prayer's curative efficacy was searched by researchers [37]. Meanwhile, the goal of this study was only to update the curative effect of this type of therapy. This systematic review is aimed to overview curative effect of prayer on different diseases.
RESULTS

Infertility
In a trial study, infertile women aged between 26 and 46 years, underwent in vitro fertilization embryo transfer was investigated. These women were randomized into distant prayer and control groups. It was found that the benefits of prayer were independent of clinical or laboratory providers and clinical variables and distant prayer simplify implantation and pregnancy.

Wound healing
In an animal study, the effect of intercessory prayer on wound healing in a nonhuman primate species was evaluated. 22 bush with wounds resulting from chronic self-injurious behavior were entered the study. It was found that the prayer group animals had a greater reduction in wound size and a greater improvement in hematological parameters than the control animals. This study is important because it was conducted in a nonhuman species; therefore, the likelihood of a placebo effect was removed.

Cardiovascular disease
In a human study, cardiovascular outcomes related to prayer was evaluated. In this study, 799 coronary care unit patients at discharge were randomized to intercessory prayer or no prayer conditions. This study showed that, intercessory prayer did not affect the 26-week outcome after discharge from a coronary care unit [38].

The therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer [IP] was evaluated in a coronary care unit population. The result showed that control group required ventilator assistance, antibiotics, and diuretics more frequently than patients in the IP group. These data suggest that intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian God has a helpful therapeutic effect in patients admitted to a CCU [39].

The prospective relationship between spiritual experiences and health in a sample of patients surviving an acute myocardial infarction [AMI] with depression or low social support was assessed. It was found little evidence that self-reported spirituality, frequency of church attendance, or frequency of prayer is associated with cardiac morbidity or all-cause mortality post AMI in patients with depression and/or low perceived support [40].

In a study, it was evaluated whether [1] receiving intercessory prayer or [2] being certain of receiving intercessory prayer was associated with uncomplicated recovery after coronary artery bypass graft [CABG] surgery. Intercessory prayer itself had no effect on complication-free recovery from CABG, but certainty of receiving intercessory prayer was associated with a higher incidence of complications. [41].

Data from a pilot study suggested that noetic therapies—healing practices that are not mediated by tangible elements—can reduce preprocedural distress and might affect outcomes in patients undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention. Neither masked prayer nor MIT therapy significantly improved clinical outcome after elective catheterization or percutaneous coronary intervention [42].

In a review article, although some of the results of individual studies suggest a positive effect of intercessory prayer, the majority do not and the evidence does not support a recommendation either in favor or against the use of intercessory prayer [25]. The role of religion in health outcomes was assessed and the effect of religion on health outcomes was described. The result showed that religious activity may boost health outcomes [43].
**Rheumatoid arthritis**

The clinical effects of prayer were investigated. Patients receiving in-person intercessory prayer showed significant overall improvement during 1-year follow up. No additional effects from supplemental, distant intercessory prayer were found. In-person intercessory prayer may be a useful adjunct to standard medical care for certain patients with rheumatoid arthritis. Supplemental, distant intercessory prayer offers no extra benefits [44].

**Bloodstream infection**

The retrospective healing effect of prayer inpatients diagnosed with a bloodstream infection was investigated. The result found that 1] the differences between groups, although significantly favoring patients for whom prayer was offered, were very small; 2] the medians of the two groups differed by a small margin. 3] No attempt was made to compare for unusual biases, such as day of admission and discharge. It is conceivable, for example, that patients admitted toward the end of the week may have been investigated and treated more slowly and those due for discharge toward the end of the week may have been retained until the start of the next week [45].

Retroactive effect of intercessory prayer in patients with a bloodstream infection was determined. Result demonstrated shorter stay in hospital and shorter duration of fever in patients with a bloodstream infection and should be considered for use in clinical practice [46].

**Depression and anxiety**

The effect of direct contact person-to-person prayer on depression, anxiety, positive emotions, and salivary cortisol levels was investigated. At the completion of the trial, participants receiving the prayer intervention showed significant improvement of depression and anxiety, as well as increases of daily spiritual experiences and optimism compared to controls [p < 0.01 in all cases]. Direct contact person-to-person prayer may be useful as an adjunct to standard medical care for patients with depression and anxiety. Further research in this area is indicated [47].

**Cystic fibrosis**

Frequency, perceived effectiveness, and cost of religious, physical, and other nonmedical practices was determined. Most respondent perceived benefit [e.g., group prayer, 95%; religious articles, 81%; chiropractic, 69%]. These treatments, apparently used by most patients/families, rarely interfered with medical care. Physician openness and empathy toward patients’ beliefs might improve rapport and simplify discussion of possible helpful or adverse effects of nonmedical treatment [48].

**Kidney dialysis**

The effect of intercessory prayer, positive visualization, and outcome expectancy on a wide range of medical and psychological measures in critically ill patients undergoing kidney dialysis was investigated. They conclude that the curative effects of such intervention is little [49].

**General anesthesia**

The effect of prayer and relaxation technique applied while patients are under general anesthesia for open-heart surgery was evaluated. One group listened to prayer during the surgery, the other listened to relaxation technique and one, placebo. The result
showed that the prayer group is less likely to believe that prayer would assist conventional medical treatments. The length of stay after surgery and the incidence of sternal wound infection was decreased [50].

Prayer intervention appeared to effectively reduce the subject's level of concern only and Better physical functioning and better mental health scores if the subject initially believed that the problem could be resolved [51].

**Alcohol abuse**

Randomized controlled trials showed that intercessory prayer may improve health outcomes in patients admitted to a coronary care unit but showed no effect on alcohol abuse. Islamic-based psychotherapy speeds recovery from anxiety and depression in Muslims. Non-RCTs indicate that religious activities appear to benefit blood pressure, immune function, depression, and mortality [52].

**Psychiatric conditions**

The effect of intercessory prayer on children with psychiatric conditions was investigated. This study show little additional benefits for patients who received intercessory prayer compared to those who received treatment as usual [53].

**Impaired auditory, hearing and/or vision**

The effect of IP on impaired auditory, hearing and/or vision was assessed. The result showed that Rural Mozambican subjects exhibited enhanced audition and/or visual acuity subsequent to PIP. The magnitude of measured effects exceeds that reported in previous suggestion and hypnosis studies [54].

**Cancer**

The use of alternative therapy [AT] in families of children with cancer with its use in those with routine pediatric conditions was compared. Pediatricians need to be aware that their patients may not tell them about AT practices they are using in addition to prescribed treatment [55].

In a human study, it appeared that several different religious coping methods were used such as putting trust in God about the course of their illness, believing in an afterlife and therefore being less afraid of death, finding blessings in their lives and appraising their cancer experience in a more constructive religious light [56].

the impact of intercessory prayer on spiritual well-being was assessed. Participants with cancer whom the research team randomly allocated to the experimental group to receive remote intercessory prayer showed small but significant improvements in spiritual well-being. [57].

**Spinal surgery**

Many patients believe prayer helps them recover from health problems. Benefits of spirituality on other illnesses and surgical procedures have been reported. It is unknown whether patients with strong spiritual beliefs have a greater propensity for successful recovery from spinal surgery. The results suggest that recovery from spinal surgery may be more dependent on proper patient selection and surgical technique than on patient spiritual beliefs [58].
HIV

In a study on 66 patients with history of AIDS, distant healing therapy was carried out and it was shown that this kind of therapy has trivial effect in the treatment of patients with HIV [59].

The result showed that the African American men and women differed in their selection of prayer as a self-care strategy for managing HIV-related depression, fatigue, and nausea. A higher proportion of women than men used prayer to manage fatigue, and more men than women reported using prayer to manage nausea and depression [60].

WART

The efficacy of one form of distant healing on common skin warts was assessed. The result showed that distant healing from experienced healers had no effect on the number or size of patients’ warts [61].

The therapeutic effects of Islamic intercessory prayer on warts was examined. The results revealed that there were no significant differences between the groups in terms of healing. Although participants believed in the therapeutic effects of prayer, when participants did not trust the intercessor, prayer had no effect on warts [62].

Pregnancy

A double-blind, randomized clinical trial, it was investigated whether intercessory prayer [IP] influences the adverse outcomes of pregnancies. The women in the IP and control groups presented a similar number of adverse medical events with non-significant p. No significant differences were detected in the frequency of adverse outcomes in pregnant women who practiced IP and those in the control group [63].

Pulmonary diseases

The role of prayer in healing and its implications for nursing was investigated. It is concluded that, although the evidence on the healing power of spirituality is inconclusive, there are indications that it has potential for the health and wellbeing of both patients and nurses [63]

Chronic diseases

Patients were treated by various methods of distant healing; Quality of life improved significantly in the treated group, while it remained stable in the control group. Positive expectation was significantly correlated with outcome. Chronically ill patients who want to be treated by distant healing and know that they are treated improve in quality of life [63].

CONCLUSION

In this study, curative and clinical Effect of intercession on different diseases were presented using published articles in scientific sites. Besides, the concept of intercessory prayer, different forms of prayer, literature concerning efficacy of clinical trials and non-clinical trials were reviewed. It was concluded that the potential power of faith in healing of many diseases was observed. Although some reviews or meta-analysis stated null or small therapeutic effect, further clinical un-biased studies are still required to deny or confirm its effectiveness.
REFERENCES

11. Miraj, S., A review study of therapeutic effects of Iranian borage (Echium amoenum Fisch), Der Pharmacia Lettre, 2016, 8(6) p.102-109
22. Jafari, A., the association of serum levels of folic acid and homocysteine in pregnant women with pre-eclampsia Iranian journal of obstetrics,gynecology and infertility, 2014.
26. Lopez, MD., Effect of climatic conditions and soil type on antioxidant compounds in organic and conventional blueberries (Vaccinium corymbosum L.), Planta medica, 2016, 81(S 01) p.1-381.
31. Silva, S., et al., Variation of anthocyanins and other major phenolic compounds throughout the ripening of four Portuguese blueberry (Vaccinium corymbosum L) cultivars, Natural product research, 2017, 31(1) p.93-98.
33. Cheatham, CL., et al., Blueberry Consumption Affects Serum Uric Acid Concentrations in Older Adults in a Sex-Specific Manner. Antioxidants (Basel, Switzerland), 2016, 5(4).


47. Tsuda, H., et al., Antioxidant Activities and Anti-Cancer Cell Proliferation Properties of Natsuhaze (Vaccinium oldhamii Miq.), Shashanbo (V. bracteatum Thunb.) and Blueberry Cultivars. Plants (Basel, Switzerland), 2013, 2(1) p.57-71.


62. Kontou, N., et al., The role of number of meals, coffee intake, salt and type of cookware on colorectal cancer development in the context of the Mediterranean diet, Public health nutrition, 2013. 16(05) p.928-935.