

Stress therapies help beat cancer

WASHINGTON

Psychological counselling, muscle relaxation and other strategies for reducing stress in breast cancer patients can cut their risk of death from the disease by more than half, according to a study published in the online journal *Cancer*.

The study also found that psychological intervention reduced the risk that the tumours would return by 45 per cent. Even when the tumours returned, patients who received the counselling had six more months without cancer compared with those who did not.

The researchers, led by psychology professor Barbara Andersen of Ohio State University, focused on stress reduction as a primary reason patients appeared to benefit from the group counselling sessions.

Other scientists said there was not enough evidence to support that idea.

"You have to be a little cautious in interpreting these results," Dr Smita Bhatia, director of the Centre for Cancer Survivorship at City of Hope in Duarte, California, said. "There is obviously some effect which is persisting long term . . . it just needs to be teased out more, which part of the program is doing."

Michael Stefanek, director of the American Cancer Society's Behavioural Research Centre, said that the idea that psychological treatment could prolong the lives of cancer patients had been "controversial for years".

Two recent studies that focused on women with early-stage breast cancer found no survival advantage and he cautioned that patients should not expect counselling to prolong their lives.

In the latest study, psychologists taught patients a muscle-relaxation technique to reduce physical stress, strategies for combating the fatigue brought on by chemotherapy and encouraged them to devote their energy to fun activities, Professor Andersen said.

She said it was not clear how the counselling helped patients but one theory was that stress activated hormones that taxed the immune system.