

## Mistletoe can help kiss goodbye to cancer side effects

By [Gill Cox](#)

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According to folklore, mistletoe 'magic' may seal romance, bestow fertility and bring peace to warring spouses.

The plant has also been credited with the power of healing – an attribute currently being harnessed by a new outpatient unit at the independent Raphael Medical Centre in Kent, which offers integrated cancer care.

The centre uses mistletoe (known by its Latin plant name, *viscum album*) to combat undesirable effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, such as fatigue, nausea, weight loss, low mood and infections.



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**Magical: Mistletoe's healing properties are being harnessed at a cancer unit**

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Advocates believe the herb boosts the immune system and may even help kill tumour cells - particularly breast, gynaecological, colo-rectal, pancreatic and lung cancer, along with lymphomas and leukaemia.

Results have been so promising that Professor Gene Feder, a GP and Professor of Primary Care at Bristol University, is initiating the UK's first pilot study.

From his GP experience he says: 'Patients receiving mistletoe during and after radiotherapy or chemotherapy appear to tolerate those treatments better. The university is planning a pilot double-blind randomised controlled trial, and hope to start recruiting in Bristol in April.'

Treatment is usually by injections - two a week for two years. Patients inject at home after initial treatment by medical staff to monitor effects.

Dr Maurice Orange MSc, who heads the integrated cancer care clinic at Raphael, explains: 'We look for inflammation at the injection site.'

This may be itchy, tender or painful for a day or two. Like after-effects of a bee sting, redness indicates the body's immune response. For this treatment that's desirable. After weeks or months of treatment it settles down.

'Similarly, within 24 hours of an injection we expect patients to feel off-colour, fatigued, headachy with bodily aches and pains, and possibly raised body temperature - like mild flu, but lasting about 12 hours. Again it's a positive sign. The immune system is firing into action. Depending on reactions we adjust doses, increasing as patients get used to it.'

Dr Orange stresses that mistletoe is an adjunct to conventional cancer treatment. While patients sometimes want to avoid orthodox treatment, he sees his job as discussing best treatments, often referring patients to sympathetic oncologists.



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**Kiss of life: Anne Marshall-Lee, 51, who is receiving mistletoe treatment for her breast cancer**

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One patient who believes mistletoe has been the kiss of life is Anne Marshall-Lee. Diagnosed with breast cancer in January 2009, the 51-year-old teacher from Manchester was advised to have a mastectomy.

She studied the debate about whether mastectomy is appropriate for her particular cancer - DCIS (Ductal Carcinoma in situ - cancer in the breast ducts) which later progressed to invasive cancer. She declined a mastectomy.

Specialists ruled out lumpectomy, in which only the tumour is removed.

'When the surgeon at my local hospital returned from leave, he saw my records and asked if I'd like to be referred for mistletoe therapy. I hadn't heard of this, but after discussion felt very comfortable with the idea,' recalls Anne.

She started injections in March 2009 and her NHS consultant kept watch with biopsies and scans.

Two weeks ago an ultrasound scan left Anne jubilant.

'In the last six months the diseased area reduced by almost two inches,' reports Anne. 'I'm looking forward to further successes as treatment continues.'

The average cost of mistletoe therapy is £50 a month.

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