

# At These Hotels and Spas, Cancer Is No Obstacle to Quality Care

Cancer often can mean no more trips to the spa or five-star meals. That's all changing, thanks to these resorts and the nonprofits that trained them.

It was a big deal for Melanie Kennedy, a former accountant from Bangor, Northern Ireland, to indulge in a massage at the spa at [Culloden Estate and Spa](#), in Belfast, earlier this year. Ms. Kennedy has stage four incurable breast cancer, and getting spa treatments have been a challenge ever since she was diagnosed almost six years ago at the age of 35. The lymph nodes she had removed in her arm meant that an overly aggressive massage could lead to painful swelling called lymphedema, and on top this risk, she was self-conscious about the scars from her mastectomy.

But Ms. Kennedy had heard that Culloden had recently trained its therapists on giving treatments to guests with cancer and decided to try one out. "My cancer makes me nervous to go spas because I'm not sure that the therapists know what to do, but this time, I was in capable hands," she said. "It was the most relaxing experience I've had since being diagnosed."

Culloden is one of several hundred properties around the world increasingly catering to clients with cancer. The biggest change is in hotel spas where therapists are getting training in the needs and restrictions of cancer-afflicted guests when it comes to massages, facials and manicures.

Dr. Susan Prockop, an oncologist at [Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center](#), said that cancer patients need to be cautious with spa treatments because of issues like low blood circulation, or low red or white cell count. "This may mean soft tissue damage during a massage. Patients with lymphedema also need special massage," she said. In addition, Dr. Prockop said that some cancer therapies are sensitive to ingredients that may be in massage oil or facial products, making rashes and skin irritation more likely.

Dietary modifications can be necessary, too. Some properties have also tasked nutritionists to work with their kitchen staff so that they can cater meals and diets to clients with specific needs. Common nutrition plans include [low-microbial diets](#), which lowers the risk of infection, while patients who have difficulty swallowing may need to stick to puréed food or liquids. "Training hotels on the potential requirements for clients with cancer is a good idea and long overdue," Dr. Prockop said.

Catherine Bartolomei, an owner of [Farmhouse Inn & Spa](#), said that a nutritionist has worked with its kitchen staff on how to make accommodations for a variety of dietary restrictions, including those associated with cancer. “We have our share of guests with cancer and want them to be able to come here and eat well,” she said. “It’s something we are very sensitive to.”

[The Peninsula Hotels](#), a collection of 10 luxury properties, is another example. Some of the culinary team at the hotels have been trained by a nutritionist on the various dietary needs guests with cancer may have.

David Codney, executive chef at the [Peninsula Beverly Hills](#), said that he enjoys coming up with creative dishes for these diners. “It’s not just about giving them the food that they need,” he said. “The dishes should taste and look good.” For those who can only eat puréed or soft foods, for example, Mr. Codney may make a Parmesan onion soup finished with herbs or a tofu with a salsa verde of parsley, shallots and capers.

“Our guests with cancer should feel normal, just like anyone else,” he said.

It may be this sense of normalcy that those with cancer appreciate most.

Culloden decided to invest in the training for its spa staff last year, according to Eoin McGrath, a business development manager, because a growing number of guests with cancer were asking for spa treatments. “Our therapists were uncomfortable working on these guests because they didn’t have proper knowledge on the best way to do so,” he said.

Mr. McGrath hired Julie Bach, founder of [Wellness for Cancer](#), a nonprofit that educates spas on how to provide cancer wellness services, to train the hotel’s spa therapists. Following an intensive four-day workshop late last year, Culloden’s spa added four cancer-specific treatments including a facial and a back, face and scalp massage. According to Mr. McGrath, the spa gets around 20 bookings a month for these services.

Wellness for Cancer has trained staff at more than 200 hotel spas since it introduced the training in 2012, according to Ms. Bach. The list includes small boutique properties such as Farmhouse Inn & Spa in Sonoma, Calif., and large ones that are part of well-known brands like the Four Seasons, at locations in Hong Kong and Surfside, Fla.

Ms. Bach, whose parents both died of cancer, said that she launched the training because through her volunteer work with cancer patients, she realized many were being turned away from spas.

“I wanted to find a way to make spa treatments accessible for them,” she said.

Ms. Bach developed her program in conjunction with oncologists, integrative medicine doctors and other wellness specialists. She has a team of 10 people, including herself, who travel to hotels to teach the workshops.

The luxury skin care brand [Natura Bisse](#) is behind another program that’s offered to aestheticians at the near-300 hotel spas that carry the company’s products. The company’s nonprofit arm, the [Ricardo Fisas Foundation](#), has a three-day workshop at its headquarters in Barcelona on giving facials for clients with cancer. “A big part of what’s taught is that no one person is the same, so what’s a skin issue with one person isn’t necessarily the case with another,” said Josanna Gaither, the brand’s director of education. Learning how to talk to clients with cancer in a compassionate manner is also covered.

Some aestheticians at the [Shibui Spa](#), at the Greenwich Hotel in New York City, have received the training, and so have those from the new Santuario le Domaine spa at [Abadía Retuerta LeDomaine](#), a countryside estate two hours north of Madrid.

Beth Robinson, a computer analyst from Colorado Springs, Colo., has been getting facials at the spa, Strata, at [Garden of the Gods Club Resort](#) in her hometown for several years and was diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct last December. Coincidentally, her aesthetician and the spa’s director, Rebecca Johnston, along with her staff of 30, got trained by Ms. Bach of Wellness for Cancer the following month. This meant that Ms. Robinson was able to continue her facials with some modifications. “When you have cancer, anything that you can do in your life that is normal to you is the best thing emotionally,” she said. “For me, that’s getting a facial with Rebecca.”