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Evaluation of a lifestyle intervention program in primary care on physical and mental health and quality of life of cancer survivors: a pilot study

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Abstract

Introduction: Cancer survivors often suffer from fatigue and (mental) health impairments. Despite evidence for effectiveness, lifestyle interventions are seldom applied in their aftercare. The aim of this study was to assess feasibility of a lifestyle intervention program on physical and mental wellbeing and quality of life (QoL) of cancer survivors, and to get a first impression of effectiveness, by means of a pilot study.

Methods: Nine subjects were enrolled in a 12-month lifestyle intervention pilot study without a control group, conducted in a Dutch primary care centre. The intervention consisted of individual and group lifestyle training focusing on diet, exercise and mind-body interaction. The main outcomes were physical and mental health and QoL.

Results: All 9 subjects completed the 12-month lifestyle intervention program. We found a large positive effect on fatigue ($r=-0.9$), stress ($r=-0.8$) and anxiety ($r=-0.9$). With respect to quality of life, large improvements in vitality ($r=0.7$), role limitations due to physical health ($r=-0.7$), role limitations due to emotional problems ($r=-0.8$) and personal health experience ($r=0.8$) were found. Subjects' arm strength increased ($r=0.9$), but there were no significant changes in other physical parameters, depressive symptoms, social optimism and autonomy. Contradictory results were found for pain.

Conclusion: Implementation of this lifestyle intervention program seems feasible in this small uncontrolled pilot study. The reduced QoL that is typical for cancer survivors was positively influenced by this program. Most prominent results were retrieved for fatigue and mental functioning, whereas little effects were found for physical health.

Keywords: Integrative medicine; lifestyle medicine; cancer survivor

Introduction

The number of cancer cases was estimated at 14 million worldwide in 2012 and this number is expected to increase to 24 million by 2035 [1]. This increase in cancer cases is accompanied by an increase in cancer survivors, mainly due to improved treatment methods [2]. Unfortunately, being cured from cancer does not necessarily mean being vital and healthy. Survival from cancer is associated with reduced quality of life and impairments in mental and physical functioning. In The Netherlands, more than 50% of cancer survivors reported increased fatigue, 30-50% suffered from mild to moderate anxiety and/or depression and 15% developed long term physical health problems [3].

Moreover, cancer survivors are characterised by poorer lifestyle behaviour compared to before diagnosis. Badr et al.[4] suggested female survivors, young adult survivors and survivors of cancers of the central nervous system or lymphoma are most at risk for poor dietary practices, sedentary behaviours, and decreased quality of life. Unfortunately, aftercare for cancer survivors is generally insufficient [5]. Therefore, a tailored lifestyle intervention program might be beneficial

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