

Optimizing Cancer Survivors' Health: The Role of Lifestyle Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Lifestyle-related behaviors (eg, weight management, physical activity, diet, and so on) play a vital role in the health of cancer survivors. As the population of cancer survivors increases, an estimated 20.3 million by 2026, nurse practitioners across diverse settings will become more involved in cancer survivorship care. Evidence has shown that certain lifestyle behaviors can enhance the lives of cancer survivors and, in some cases, reduce cancer-related mortality. Several cancer organizations have developed guidelines for assessing lifestyle-related factors among cancer survivors along with evidence-based counseling strategies to help motivate patients toward healthier behaviors.

Keywords: cancer survivors, diet/nutrition, exercise, lifestyle behaviors, wellness

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Currently in the United States, there are over 15.5 million cancer survivors, and this number is expected to grow to 20.3 million by 2026.¹ The overall 5-year survival rate approaches 70%, with nearly half (47%) of the survivors being 70 years of age or older.¹ The 3 most common male cancers are prostate, colorectal, and melanoma, whereas breast, uterine, and colorectal cancers are the most prevalent among females.¹ Considering 1 of 2 males and 1 of 3 females in the US² will develop cancer during their lifetime, there is a high likelihood that nurse practitioners (NPs) across settings will be providing care to cancer survivors. Cancer survivors often have unique needs, emotionally and physically, as a result of the disease and treatments on a multitude of organ systems increasing their risk for comorbid conditions affecting the cardiovascular, metabolic, musculoskeletal, and neurologic systems, to name a few.¹ Factors associated with higher comorbidities are being a breast or endometrial cancer survivor, being 10 years postdiagnosis, physical inactivity, and overweight/obesity.³ There is also a relationship between inflammation in the body and many chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, hyperglycemia, obesity, and cancer, which provides a biological rationale for elevated risks of other chronic illnesses among cancer survivors.⁴

Additionally, many survivors are at an increased risk for recurrence and secondary cancers.¹ As more emphasis is being placed on cancer survivorship follow-up care in the primary care setting,⁵ primary care NPs need to be better prepared to help manage lingering and late-term effects of cancer and cancer therapies, as well as counsel patients regarding lifestyle behavior change to potentially prevent comorbidities and reduce the risk for recurrence and the development of new cancers. Regardless of an NP's specialty practice, opportunities exist to educate patients about healthy lifestyle behaviors. One of the core competencies of all NPs addresses disease prevention and health promotion through motivating patients toward healthy behavior change.⁶ This is an area of cancer survivorship care in which NPs can have a significant impact on helping to improve quality of life and longevity among cancer survivors.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) has published guidelines on nutrition and physical activity for cancer survivors, which include 3 broad categories focused on weight management, physical activity, and diet.⁷ General recommendations also include statements about tobacco cessation and alcohol intake. In 2016, the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) included these recommendations in their clinical practice guidelines for survivorship.⁸

The general principles in the NCCN healthy lifestyle guidelines also include sun safety and the recommendation for regular primary care follow-up visits to address preventive measures and health screenings. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) has developed a helpful tool kit for clinicians on obesity and cancer, as well as a weight management resource for patients.⁹ Healthy lifestyle recommendations were emphasized as a standard component of survivorship care plans in the 2007 Institute of Medicine report titled *Implementing Survivorship Care Planning*, with the aim to maximize both short- and long-term health outcomes of cancer survivors after cancer treatments.¹⁰ Survivorship care plans are documents that summarize a patient's cancer diagnosis and treatments, list lingering side effects (eg, fatigue) and potential late effects (eg, osteoporosis), outline a follow-up surveillance plan, and should provide information about healthy lifestyle behaviors.¹¹ They are intended to improve continuity of care and communication between health care providers and patients.¹¹ More primary care providers will likely receive these documents in the future, which should improve their understanding about their role in survivorship care.

Despite initiatives aimed to promote healthy lifestyle-related practices among cancer survivors, their behaviors, on average, either parallel or are worse than those of the general population.^{12,13} Unfortunately, many cancer survivors are either overweight or obese and are not engaging in any regular physical activity. In a recent study of cancer survivors, investigators found rates of obesity, as defined by a body mass index (BMI) of greater than 30 kg/m², were higher than among the general population, approximately 32% versus 30%, and about one third of cancer survivors were overweight.¹² Additionally, these cancer survivors were less likely than noncancer controls to be meeting the current exercise guidelines (36% compared with 38%, respectively). Approximately 27% of cancer survivors reported heavy drinking (ie, at least 1 day with 5 or more drinks during the past year), slightly lower than that reported by noncancer patients (28%).¹² Prevalence data on smoking among cancer survivors revealed estimates between 9% and 18%, with a recent report finding a 17% smoking

rate, which is comparable to the general population.^{12,13} A cancer diagnosis is often viewed as a *teachable moment*; however, it appears that improved efforts are needed to help patients achieve healthier lives after a cancer experience.

NPs are in a prime position to educate and counsel patients on the importance of a healthy diet, physical activity, weight management, and the avoidance of harmful behaviors such as smoking and alcohol intake. Many cancer survivors seek information and strategies to improve their long-term physical and emotional health after a cancer diagnosis and often feel empowered when they are provided with the tools to help them enhance their overall health and well-being. Ultimately, it is their responsibility to adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors, but NPs across settings can help cancer survivors gain self-efficacy for incorporating health enhancing practices into their lives. With many resources now available to guide NPs in counseling patients about healthy lifestyle promotion, it is hoped that many more survivors will live long, healthy, and productive lives.

OVERWEIGHT/OBESITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Obesity (ie, BMI \geq 30 kg/m²) is a risk factor for several cancers, such as postmenopausal breast cancer, colon, gastric, pancreatic, endometrial, and kidney cancer; there is also strong evidence linking obesity with cancer of the gallbladder and ovaries.¹⁴ Additionally, obesity is associated with higher rates of recurrence and lower rates of survival for breast, colon, and prostate cancers.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Obesity may be related to higher rates of recurrence and decreased survival among endometrial cancer survivors as well.¹⁸ Obesity has been implicated in approximately 15% to 20% of all cancer mortality.⁹ It is 1 of the most common comorbid chronic conditions among cancer survivors and is related to additional comorbidities, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, metabolic syndrome, as well as some musculoskeletal diseases.¹⁹ It also increases an individual's risk for secondary malignancies.²⁰ A concerning trend among cancer survivors is that obesity rates appear to be rising at a higher rate than among noncancer patients.¹²

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