Among Cancer Survivors, Walking Pace May Predict Mortality Risk

Cancer survivors who walk slowly are at greater risk of death compared with those who walk more briskly.

March 15, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Walking at a slow pace has been linked to an increased risk of death from any cause in people who have survived cancer, according to a study spearheaded by the National Cancer Institute and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. The association was detected in nine separate populations of cancer survivors.

Researchers led by Elizabeth Salerno, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor of surgery in the division of public health sciences at Washington University, conducted an analysis of data collected during the National Institutes of Health–American Association of Retired Persons (NIH-AARP) Diet and Health Study. The study's roughly 233,000 participants provided information about their overall health, walking pace and disability status at two separate intervals between 1995 and 2006 and were followed through 2011. About 30,000 of the participants were cancer survivors.

Salerno's analysis showed that participants who had previously been diagnosed with cancer were 42% more likely to walk at the slowest pace and 24% more likely to report a mobility disability than participants who had not. In participants who had previously been diagnosed with cancer but did not report a disability, slowest walkers were more than twice as likely to die during follow-up as fastest walkers. Cancer survivors with a disability were 80% more likely to die in that follow-up period, according to the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR). Both trends were apparent for multiple cancer types, including oral cancer, breast cancer, rectal cancer, colon cancer, prostate cancer, urinary cancers, respiratory cancers, melanoma and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

"To our knowledge, this analysis is the first to explore the relationship between cancer, walking pace and subsequent mortality in 15 different cancer types," Salerno told the Washington University News Hub. Since correlation does not prove causation, she added, "Next steps include identifying the underlying reasons for these associations."

These early results, however, suggest people in treatment for cancer or people with a history of cancer may benefit from interventions specifically designed to help them improve their walking ability and pace. Salerno said such interventions could include new treatment and rehabilitation

strategies.

“It’s possible that slow walking may be due to the cancer itself, adverse effects of treatment or changes in lifestyle,” she said. “There is still much to be learned about these complex relationships, but our results highlight the importance of monitoring and even targeting walking pace after cancer.”

The study was published in Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention, a journal of the AACR, on March 4.

For more on the benefits of mobility and even light exercise, read “Can Walking Less Than the Recommended Amount Lower Death Risk?,” “For Black Cancer Survivors, Regular Physical Activity Boosts Quality of Life” and “Mobility Program for People With Cancer Reduces Dependency on Hospitalization.”

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