A New Push to Prescribe Exercise Following a Cancer Diagnosis

A consortium of health providers and researchers hopes to raise public awareness of how exercise can benefit those living with cancer.

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A consortium of health care providers and researchers is leading a new charge to educate the medical system and the public alike about how exercise can both prevent some cancers and provide various benefits following a cancer diagnosis. They hope that through their initiative, called “Moving Through Cancer,” the cancer-related benefits of exercise will become as commonly known as its benefits in the realm of cardiovascular disease.

A trio of papers has been published to back the launch of “Moving Through Cancer,” including one in CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians, coauthored by the initiative’s leader, Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH, a professor of health sciences at Penn State College of Medicine. That paper calls for engagement with clinicians to get them to guide patients through cancer with exercise as an adjunct form of medicine.

The other two papers were published in the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) research journal Medicine & Science. One concerns the ACSM roundtable report, based on a review of available scientific evidence, on physical activity, sedentary behavior and cancer prevention. The other includes exercise regimen guidelines for cancer survivors.

Overall, the papers made recommendations about the benefits of exercise for cancer prevention, treatment and recovery.

“With more than 43 million cancer survivors worldwide, we have a growing need to address the unique health issues facing people living with and beyond cancer and better understand how exercise may help prevent and control cancer,” Schmitz, also a member of the Penn State Cancer Institute, said in a press release.

The consortium stresses that exercise can lower the risk of developing colon, breast, endometrial, kidney, bladder, esophageal and stomach cancers. Both during and following treatment for cancer, exercise can improve fatigue, anxiety, depression, physical function and quality of life, and studies have shown it can raise survival rates following a diagnosis with breast, colon or prostate cancer.

In general, the investigators behind the initiative recommend 30 minutes of moderately intense aerobic exercise three times per week and 20 to 30 minutes of strength training exercise twice weekly. Health care providers can, in fact, tailor specific exercise prescriptions for the needs of individual patients following a cancer diagnosis—adjusting the frequency, intensity, duration and type of exercise to influence particular outcomes, including quality of life, fatigue and pain.

"For example, if we're seeing a head and neck cancer patient with a specific set of symptoms, we could give them an exercise prescription personalized to them," Schmitz said.

To read a press release about the initiative, click here.

Click here to read the paper, Exercise is medicine in oncology: Engaging clinicians to help patients move through cancer."

Click here to read the paper, "American College of Sports Medicine Roundtable Report on Physical Activity, Sedentary Behavior, and Cancer Prevention and Control."

Click here to read the paper, "Exercise Guidelines for Cancer Survivors: Consensus Statement from International Multidisciplinary Roundtable."

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