Undergoing Chemo? Try This for 6 Weeks and Feel Better

A six-week exercise program resulted in better mental health outcomes for older adults with cancer.

July 12, 2019 By Alicia Green

For older adults undergoing chemotherapy, participating in a six-week structured exercise program can improve anxiety, mood and social and emotional well-being, according to new research published in the Journal of the American Geriatric Society, reports Healio.

Being diagnosed with cancer often increases a person's chances of experiencing anxiety and mood disturbances. This not only can affect overall well-being but also can lead to treatment interruptions and decreased survival, researchers say.

Scientists conducted a secondary analysis of a nationwide randomized controlled trial to determine the effects of exercise on anxiety, mood and well-being in 252 older adults ages 60 and older who were on their first six weeks of chemotherapy.

Some adults were given a home-based low- to moderate-intensity aerobic and resistance exercise program known as Exercise for Cancer Patients (EXCAP), which included a pedometer, three therapeutic bands (medium, heavy, extra heavy) and an instruction manual.

These participants received individually tailored, progressive walking prescriptions based on their baseline number of steps. They wore the pedometer to record their daily steps over the six-week period, which began on their first day of chemo, and were encouraged to increase their steps by 5% to 20% every week.

Participants used the therapeutic resistance bands to perform 10 required exercises (e.g., squats or chest presses) and four optional exercises daily with an individually tailored set/repetition scheme. In addition, they were asked to progressively increase their intensity, sets and/or number of repetitions during the program.

Those who didn't receive the EXCAP kit and instruction manual during the intervention period were provided the kit and instructional manual at the end of the study. The pedometer was given to them for four days at baseline and four days before the study concluded to record their daily steps.

At the end of six weeks, investigators found significant improvements in anxiety, mood and well-being among those in the exercise group compared with the control group. What's more, participants in the exercise program with the worst baseline scores for each outcome saw greater improvements at six weeks than those who received usual care.

"Current exercise guidelines for healthy adults and cancer survivors primarily focus on improving physical fitness and cardiopulmonary function and recommend a one-size-fits-all approach," wrote study authors. "However, the recommended amount of activity should be tailored to a specific patient for a specific outcome, especially in older adults with cancer who may not be able to achieve guideline-recommended level exercise."

Researchers also say that more randomized control trials are needed to "evaluate the specific exercise types, durations and frequencies appropriate for specific outcomes."

For related coverage, read "Want Better Treatment Outcomes? Follow These New Exercise Guidelines" and "Exercise Can Help Women With Breast Cancer During Chemotherapy."

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