Conceptualizing and Measuring Physical Functioning in Cancer Survivorship Studies

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Key Points ...

- Consistent naming and measurement of physical functioning outcomes in intervention studies of cancer survivors are important.
- Physical functioning can be measured in three distinct dimensions: (a) performance tests of objective mobility, (b) self-reported perceived mobility, and (c) self-reported participation in life activities.
- Interventions may improve one or more physical functioning dimensions, depending on whether the intervention improves capacity or reduces demand.
- Valuable knowledge could be gained by more frequent testing of mediator effects in intervention studies to improve physical functioning in cancer survivors.

In previous studies of cancer survivors, the absence of a clear, consistent definition of physical functioning has created confusion in the way that physical functioning was measured and the results were interpreted. Physical functioning is a broad concept that includes physical abilities that range from simple mobility to engagement in complex activities that require adaptation to an environment. If the physical functioning outcome measured in a study is not carefully selected, an intervention may be deemed ineffective when it might have been effective on a different dimension of physical functioning.

Another difficulty in interpreting physical functioning outcomes in research studies arises from the plethora of outcome names used, such as functional status, physical functioning, functional recovery, functional limitations, disability, quality...