Health Behaviors in Cancer Survivors

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Deborah K. Mayer, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN, Norma C. Terrin, PhD, Usha Menon, PhD, RN, Gary L. Kreps, PhD, Kathy McCance, PhD, RN, Susan K. Parsons, MD, MRP, and Kathleen H. Mooney, PhD, RN

Purpose/Objectives: To describe health behaviors of cancer survivors by cancer diagnosis and to compare them to people without a personal or family cancer history.

Design: Cross-sectional secondary data analysis.

Setting: A national, list-assisted telephone survey using random-digit dialing of U.S. adults about use of cancer-related information and cancer beliefs.

Sample: 619 cancer survivors and 2,141 participants without a history of cancer from the original 6,369 Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) respondents.

Methods: Using the National Cancer Institute’s 2003 HINTS, further analyses were conducted.

Main Research Variables: Cancer history, current smoking, fruit and vegetable consumption, physical activity, and body mass index (BMI).

Findings: When controlling for demographic variables, no differences were found in self-reported health behaviors between survivors and those without cancer: 22.5% of survivors and 18.4% of those without cancer were current smokers, 18% of survivors and 14.9% of those without cancer consumed at least five fruits or vegetables per day, 45.3% of survivors and 53% of those without cancer were physically active at least weekly, and 58% of survivors and 54.9% of those without cancer were overweight or obese (i.e., BMI > 25). Only 7.4% of survivors and 6.4% of participants without cancer reported positively on all three health behaviors and had a healthy or normal weight.

Conclusions: Survivors did not have different health behaviors when compared to participants without a history of cancer. Neither group met the American Cancer Society or Healthy People 2010 objectives for healthy lifestyle behaviors. Adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors should be addressed in cancer survivors.

Implications for Nursing: Cancer survivors need to be assessed for current smoking, dietary habits, physical activity, and weight. Information and resources should be made available, if needed, to promote the adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors.

Tremendous progress has been made in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer since the 1950s, leading to a growing population of cancer survivors (American Cancer Society, 2007; Edwards et al., 2005). The United States has more than 10 million cancer survivors, representing 3.5% of the population; this number is expected to grow dramatically as baby boomers age. Cancer survivors have poorer health than the general population and are at higher risk for developing second cancers. Cancer survivors do not differ from the general population in their rates of smoking, eating fruits and vegetables, engaging in regular physical activity, or maintaining a healthy or normal weight. Only 7.4% of the cancer survivors and 6.4% of participants in the control group without cancer reported positively on all three health behaviors and had a healthy or normal weight. Adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors should be addressed by nurses when caring for cancer survivors.

Key Points ...

- More than 10 million cancer survivors are living in the United States, representing 3.5% of the U.S. population. This group is expected to grow dramatically as baby boomers age.
- Cancer survivors have poorer health than the general population and are at higher risk for developing second cancers.
- Cancer survivors do not differ from the general population in their rates of smoking, eating fruits and vegetables, engaging in regular physical activity, or maintaining a healthy or normal weight. Only 7.4% of the cancer survivors and 6.4% of participants in the control group without cancer reported positively on all three health behaviors and had a healthy or normal weight.
- Neither group met the American Cancer Society or Healthy People 2010 objectives for smoking, eating fruits and vegetables, engaging in regular physical activity, or maintaining a healthy or normal weight. Adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors should be addressed by nurses when caring for cancer survivors.

Deborah K. Mayer, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN, is a project director at the Institute for Clinical Research and Health Policy Studies at the Tufts-New England Medical Center and assistant professor in the School of Medicine at Tufts University, both in Boston, MA; Norma C. Terrin, PhD, is an associate professor of medicine at the Institute for Clinical Research and Health Policy Studies at the Tufts-New England Medical Center and in the School of Medicine at Tufts University; Usha Menon, PhD, RN, is an associate professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Gary L. Kreps, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Communication at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA; Kathy McCance, PhD, RN, is a professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City; Susan K. Parsons, MD, MRP, is the director of the Health Institute and the Center on Child and Family Outcomes at the Institute for Clinical Research and Health Policy Studies at the Tufts-New England Medical Center and an associate professor of medicine and pediatrics in the School of Medicine at Tufts University; and Kathleen H. Mooney, PhD, RN, is a professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Utah. Mayer is a recipient of an American Cancer Society Doctoral Scholarship (DSCN-108161) and a National Service Research Award from the National Institute of Nursing Research (NRSA 1F31 NR09137-01A1, partially funded by National Cancer Institute training grant R25 CA093831, Mooney, principal investigator). (Submitted July 2006. Accepted for publication December 19, 2006.)

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