

A Review of Nia as an Exercise Option for Cancer Survivors

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Nia is a fusion fitness program that blends elements from the dance arts, martial arts, and healing arts, creating a workout that is adaptable to all ages and fitness levels. As a nontraditional form of exercise, Nia integrates body, mind, and spirit as well as the five sensations of flexibility, agility, mobility, strength, and stability. Nia incorporates both cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning and is adaptable to those with a sedentary or active lifestyle, making it useful for the varying abilities of cancer survivors. Oncology nurses are in a key position to educate individuals with cancer on the benefits of exercise, such as improved physical functioning and quality of life, and decreased cancer-related fatigue. The purpose of this article is to familiarize oncology nurses with the potential benefits of Nia for cancer survivors.

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Exercise during and after cancer therapy can improve physical functioning, quality of life, and cancer-related fatigue (Schmitz et al., 2010). In general, exercise studies have predominately focused on traditional exercise modalities of walking, mixed aerobic formats, and resistance training. Comparatively, a limited body of evidence-based research exists on nontraditional exercise for patients with cancer. Nontraditional exercise typically focuses on not only the body, but the mind and spirit. Some nontraditional approaches and their benefits are beginning to be reported in the literature (Chen et al., 2013; Fong et al., 2013; Reid-Arndt, Matsuda, & Cox, 2012; Sadjja & Mills, 2013).

Nia, a nontraditional form of exercise, is a cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning program that was started in 1983 by two aerobics instructors. Nia incorporates nontraditional exercise forms, like yoga and tai chi, with traditional exercise methods, like dance, that are more cardiovascular in nature. Nia is referred to as “the body’s way,” a method of using and listening to the body in accord with its specific design and structure, therefore allowing the practice to be both gentle for the individual with a sedentary lifestyle and challenging for

someone with an active lifestyle (Rosas & Rosas, 2004). Nia is particularly suitable to the individual with cancer, as it is adaptable to the varying symptoms and side effects experienced by patients based on cancer type and treatment modality.

Nia has been shown to reduce anxiety and fatigue in women with breast cancer (Lopez, Bensen, Guillen, Kurker, & Johnson, 2001; Reis, Walsh, Young-McCaughan, & Jones, 2013). A pilot study of 19 women with a history of breast cancer compared Nia to a prescribed walking routine (Lopez et al., 2001). The Nia group had a significant reduction in anxiety ($p = 0.02$), and although not statistically significant, the results also showed a reduction in depression and improved immune function (Lopez et al., 2001). Lopez et al. (2001) did not report either the number or length of sessions tested. In addition, Reis et al. (2013) conducted a 12-week, randomized, controlled trial comparing Nia practiced at home ($n = 22$) to usual care ($n = 19$) in women with breast cancer undergoing radiation therapy and found that women practicing Nia reported significantly less fatigue between 6 and 12 weeks compared to the usual care group ($p = 0.05$). In the study, participants in the Nia group received instruction and demonstration on Nia and were provided with