

Alcohol Use Assessment in Young Adult Cancer Survivors

Katherine Breitenbach, RN, MSN, APN, NP-C, Marc Epstein-Reeves, APN, ANP-BC, OCN®, ACHPN, Eileen Hacker, PhD, APN, AOCN®, Colleen Corte, RN, PhD, and Mariann R. Piano, RN, PhD, FAAN

The fastest growing population of cancer survivors in the United States is adolescents and young adults (Howlander et al., 2013). In 2010, 67,500 adolescents and young adults (aged 15–39 years) were diagnosed with cancer (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2013). The five-year survival rate for this age group is greater than 80% (NCI, 2013). Adolescent and young adult patients with cancer are challenged with many issues specific to their age group. Teenage cancer survivors have been described as the “lost tribe,” and a need has been cited for an organized continuum of both medical and social treatment strategies (Stevens, 2006).

One major challenge confronting young adults is alcohol use and abuse. In the United States and worldwide, young adults aged 18–30 years have the highest prevalence of alcoholic beverage consumption (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2013). In 2012, the rate of current alcohol use (at least one drink in the past 30 days) was 49% among people aged 18–20 and 69% among those aged 21–25 (SAMHSA, 2013). Adolescent and young adult drinking behaviors are different from adults; young adults primarily engage in binge or heavy episodic drinking. Binge drinking is highest among those 18–25 years of age, with the peak at 21 years (SAMHSA, 2013). Considering these statistics, oncology practitioners involved in the long-term follow-up of childhood cancer survivors must be knowledgeable about alcohol consumption levels and patterns of use among young adults and recognize the importance for alcohol use screening in this population.

The aims of this investigation were to determine if oncology practitioners screen for alcohol consumption and usage patterns (i.e., binge drinking) among young adult cancer survivors (aged 18–30 years) and, secondly, to determine drinking patterns and frequency of alcoholic beverage consumption among young adult survivors. Compared to the general population, young adult cancer survivors have an increased risk for developing oth-

Purpose/Objectives: To determine whether oncology practitioners assess for alcohol consumption rates and usage patterns among young adult cancer survivors, and to determine drinking patterns and frequency of alcoholic beverage consumption among young adult cancer survivors.

Design: Retrospective chart review.

Setting: Two outpatient cancer clinics.

Sample: 77 young adult survivors of childhood cancer aged 18–30 years.

Methods: Charts were selected from June to December 2009 and data were extracted using a structured questionnaire.

Main Research Variables: Oncology practitioner assessment of alcohol use and alcohol consumption of young adult cancer survivors.

Findings: Alcohol screening was conducted for 48 participants. No significant differences were noted in most variables between those not screened for alcohol use and those screened for alcohol use. Of the 48 screened for alcohol use, 30 reported “no use.” For the 18 who reported alcohol use, the terms used to describe the frequency varied and were vague.

Conclusions: The key finding of the study was that screening and documentation of alcohol consumption was poorly and inconsistently performed in the authors’ sample of young adult cancer survivors.

Implications for Nursing: Similar to healthy young adults aged 18–30 years, young adult cancer survivors are at a developmental age where it is likely they will engage in unhealthy drinking; therefore, they should be screened for alcohol use and binge drinking. Practitioners can incorporate simple, short questions into health assessment visits that allow them to screen for unhealthy alcohol use.

Key Words: alcohol consumption; young adult cancer survivors; screening

ONF, 41(5), 517–522. doi: 10.1188/14.ONF.41-05AP

er cancers, chronic conditions, and premature mortality; unhealthy drinking patterns may place young adults at additional risk for poor health outcomes (Klosky et al., 2012; Larcombe, Mott, & Hunt, 2002).