

Shifting Gears: Transitioning Healthy Lifestyle Education Into Early Post-Treatment Survivorship

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During cancer treatment, oncology nurses emphasize patient and family education about coping strategies to manage adverse events such as gastrointestinal effects and fatigue. However, information about how to return to healthy eating and physical activity behaviors may not be systematically implemented early in the post-treatment survivorship period. This article reviews and compares clinical practice guideline recommendations for nutrition and physical activity during and after cancer treatment.

AT A GLANCE

- Recommendations for nutrition and physical activity differ during and after cancer treatment.
- Nurses can educate patients to avoid prolonged sedentary time as able and work to achieve the recommended moderate to vigorous physical activity time, including resistance and balance exercises each week.
- Oncology nurses can tailor education based on the patient's status during treatment and can switch gears to help patients return to healthy lifestyle behaviors as soon as possible once treatment is completed.

KEYWORDS

cancer; nurses; diet; exercise; physical activity; survivorship

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The experience of cancer can completely disrupt every aspect of a person's life, from the shock and disbelief of diagnosis through months of arduous treatment. Oncology nurses stand with patients and families throughout the cancer experience to provide education and support, administer treatments, and assess and manage adverse events. A key component of oncology nursing care involves educating patients and caregivers about how to ensure sufficient intake of necessary nutrients and balance movement and rest during treatment.

Many patients experience overwhelming fatigue along with a host of gastrointestinal adverse events, including taste alterations, nausea, vomiting, and decreased appetite. During the active treatment phase, patients are generally advised to eat as tolerated and to practice energy conservation, balancing rest with physical activity (National Cancer Institute, 2022). Although these are often necessary coping strategies, by the end of treatment, many patients are malnourished and deconditioned (Mallard et al., 2022). Treatment completion typically leads to an abrupt decrease in contact with the oncology team, with little time to educate about how to return to healthy lifestyle behaviors during follow-up visits. Patients may feel unprepared to reintroduce a normal diet and physical activity without guidance, and referral to dedicated survivorship services, where health promotion is emphasized, may not occur for six or more months after treatment completion (Post et al., 2021).

Consistent implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as physical activity and nutrition interventions, may improve symptom management during treatment and long-term outcomes in survivorship. During active cancer treatment, research supports that these interventions improve disease and treatment-related symptoms such as fatigue, sleep, cognitive function, immune function, systemic inflammation, and body composition (Ligibel et al., 2022). A strong body of evidence highlights the importance of physical activity and healthy eating during post-treatment survivorship to improve or maintain body composition, decrease the risk of cancer recurrence, and positively affect all-cause mortality (Campbell et al., 2019). This article reviews and contrasts clinical guideline recommendations for health-promoting behaviors during and after cancer treatment to assist the