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Barriers and Motivators for Physical Activity in Cancer Patients: A Cross-Sectional Study at the university hospital of Freiburg

Background

Physical activity is a key component of cancer care, improving quality of life and reducing treatment-related side effects. However, many patients remain insufficiently active. This study aimed to identify determinants of physical activity and of participation in structured exercise programs among cancer patients.

Methods

A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted in the oncology department of the university hospital of Freiburg. Adult patients with a confirmed cancer diagnosis already affiliated with the Department of Exercise Oncology (ExOnc) and patients in the oncology outpatient clinic who were not currently receiving sports oncology care (non-ExOnc) were recruited. Data were collected via questionnaires and clinical records. Multivariable logistic regression was used to identify factors associated with regular physical activity ($\geq 1 \times$ /week) and program participation, applying a hierarchical model including functional, medical, psychosocial, and structural variables.

Results

A total of 223 patients were included (106 ExOnc, mean age 64 ± 11 years, 69.8% female; 117 non-ExOnc, mean age 62 ± 11 years, 37.1% female). In the non-ExOnc group, more patients were currently undergoing cancer treatment (93.2% vs. 63.4%), and the treatment approach was more often palliative (76.9% vs. 43.4%). Functional impairment and reduced psychological well-being were significantly associated with less physical activity (OR ≈ 0.39 and OR ≈ 0.42 , respectively). Differences in awareness and access to exercise programs were observed between groups, particularly among the non-ExOnc patients. Physician's recommendation and prior information about exercise programs were the strongest predictors of participation in structured exercise oncology services.

Conclusion

Systematic patient education and the clinicians' engagement are critical to promote physical activity in cancer care. Early identification of functional and psychosocial limitations may support tailored interventions. Our findings highlight the need for structured information strategies and integrated exercise support within clinical routine, especially in patients with advanced cancer and during ongoing anticancer therapy.

Keywords

exercise oncology; physical activity; cancer survivorship; implementation

Conflict of Interest & Ethical Approval

yes

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yes

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