

Differing Experiences of Nutrition Care During Treatment Among Oncology Nurses, Providers, and Patients

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BACKGROUND: Provision of nutrition care for patients with cancer represents a key component of holistic oncology care. However, information is limited about the use and perceptions of registered dietitian-led nutrition care in the oncology setting.

OBJECTIVES: This study aimed to better understand the experiences and expectations of patients and healthcare workers regarding nutrition care during outpatient cancer treatment.

METHODS: Oncology care team members (N = 55) and patients (N = 90) completed a survey about their knowledge of and interest in nutrition care. A subset of participants completed semistructured interviews to capture experiences with and perspectives on nutrition care practices.

FINDINGS: The majority of patients (n = 73) reported experiencing at least one nutrition impact symptom, but only 14 indicated that they frequently discussed nutrition during provider visits. In addition, 40 oncology care team members indicated frequently discussing nutrition at visits, although 13 were unaware of local nutrition resources.

KEYWORDS

healthcare delivery; nutrition therapy; health disparities; underserved patients

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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DESPITE DEMONSTRATED BENEFITS AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES, there is inadequate access to nutrition care in the outpatient oncology setting in the United States (Food and Nutrition Board, Health and Medicine Division, and National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Trujillo et al., 2019). Unlike inpatient malnutrition screening, which occurs within 24 hours of admission and uses a standardized screening tool and follow-up process required by the Joint Commission, there is no standard for screening patients or staffing registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) in the outpatient setting. Several accreditors, such as the American College of Surgeons and Commission on Cancer (2019) and the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (2020), include standards for screening and the provision of nutrition care. However, these accreditation-directed expectations are limited to specific high-nutrition risk (HNR) cancers or are outlined as part of survivorship care plans. Although nutrition care is often emphasized at the end of treatment, increasing evidence supports a proactive, interprofessional approach (Findlay et al., 2021; Oakvik & Ready, 2022). Limited nutrition resources can result in patients receiving reactive nutrition care only after the development of malnutrition or nutrition impact symptoms, as opposed to proactive nutrition care that could mitigate many treatment complications (Castillo-Martínez et al., 2018). Challenges pertaining to transportation, cost, food security, and social support can also compound nutrition care access for patients (Lorton et al., 2020). Therefore, given the benefits associated with proactive nutrition care, this study explored the experiences and expectations of patients and oncology care team members regarding nutrition care during outpatient treatment for cancer.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods, exploratory design. Surveys were administered to eligible patients and oncology care team members. Semistructured interviews were conducted with interested and eligible participants based on purposive sampling. The study was approved by the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Human Research Protections Program (#19-562). All participants provided individual informed consent.