Psychological Distress, Health Behaviors, and Benefit Finding in Survivors of Multiple Primary Cancers: Results From the 2010 Livestrong Survey

Sarah M. Belcher, BSN, RN, OCN, Carissa A. Low, PhD, Donna M. Poslusny, PhD, Rebekkah Schear, MIA, Raegan E. Kramer, BSN, RN, and Heidi S. Donovan, PhD, RN

Belcher is a doctoral candidate and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Future of Nursing Scholar in the School of Nursing; Low is an assistant professor in the Department of Medicine and Department of Psychology; and Poslusny is an assistant professor in the Department of Medicine, all at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania; Schear is the director of mission delivery for the Livestrong Foundation in Austin, TX; Kramer is a nurse resident at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania; and Donovan is a professor in the School of Nursing and the School of Medicine and vice chair for research in the School of Nursing at the University of Pittsburgh.

This research was funded, in part, by a Newmeyer-Thompson Doctoral Student Research Award from the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, a Future of Nursing Scholars Award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, grants (K23CA149082, P30CA047904) from the National Cancer Institute, and the Livestrong Foundation (source data).

Belcher, Low, Poslusny, and Donovan contributed to the conceptualization and design and provided statistical support.

Belcher, Low, and Kramer completed the data collection and provided the analysis. Belcher, Low, Poslusny, Schear, and Donovan contributed to the manuscript preparation.

Belcher can be reached at smb208@pitt.edu, with copy to editor at ONFEditor@ons.org.

Submitted February 2017. Accepted for publication April 17, 2017.

Keywords: multiple primary cancers; cancer survivorship; psychological distress; health behaviors; benefit finding

Purpose/Objectives: To evaluate whether survivorship of multiple primary cancers (MPCs) is associated with psychological distress, positive health behaviors, and benefit finding.

Design: Secondary analysis of the 2010 Livestrong cross-sectional survey.

Setting: Online survey.

Sample: 238 MPC survivors and 3,295 single cancer survivors.

Methods: Chi-square and t tests for group comparisons were used. Multivariate linear regression, adjusted for covariates, was used to determine associations between variables.

Main Research Variables: MPC versus single cancer; psychological distress, health behavior (healthy lifestyle and positive healthcare utilization), and benefit-finding scores.

Findings: Survivors of MPCs (compared to single cancer survivors) were significantly older, less likely to have a spouse or partner, further out from original cancer diagnosis, and less likely to be employed full-time, and they differed by cancer diagnoses and survivorship stage. Having MPCs was associated with significantly higher psychological distress and healthcare utilization but not healthy lifestyle or benefit finding.

Conclusions: Relative to those with single cancers, MPC survivors are at increased risk for psychological distress and are more likely to receive recommended cancer screenings. Additional research is needed to understand mechanisms surrounding psychological distress in MPC survivors.

Implications for Nursing: Targeted distress screening in MPC survivors may allow for early identification and interventions to ameliorate distress and reduce negative downstream health effects.