Social Support and Physical Activity Engagement by Cancer Survivors

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Less than 20% of adult cancer survivors participate in physical activity and, as a result of such inactivity, cancer survivors are at increased risk for developing chronic diseases. Studies have linked social support as a predictor of physical activity participation in healthy adults. The primary goal of this systematic review is to examine the relationship between social support and physical activity engagement in adult cancer survivors and determine whether additional research is needed in this area. Several databases were searched and articles were systematically extracted according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. That search yielded 69 articles, 22 of which were identified and included in this review. Fifty percent of the studies showed a significant relationship between social support and physical activity engagement; however, 59% of the participants were breast cancer survivors. The findings suggest that additional research is needed to develop social support strategies that will increase physical activity engagement in adult survivors of cancers other than breast cancer.

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The American Cancer Society (n.d.) has recommended that cancer survivors participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity that is safe, effective, and enjoyable at least five times a week. However, evidence reveals that less than 20% of adult cancer survivors are meeting the recommended physical activity guidelines, which may increase risk of developing a chronic illness, secondary cancer, or disease recurrence (Branchard, Courneya, & Stein, 2008; Hamer, Stamatakis, & Saxton, 2009).

Social support has been identified as a positive determinant of physical activity in healthy adults and people with other chronic diseases (Anderson-Bill, Winett, & Wojcik, 2011; McNiel, Wyrwich, Brownson, Clark, & Kreuter, 2006; Molloy, Dixon, Hamer, & Sniehotta, 2010; Peterson, Yates, & Hertzog, 2008; Ravenek & Schneider, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009). Although extensive research exists on the topic of social support and physical activity, little is known regarding the role of social support as a facilitator of physical activity engagement in adult cancer survivors. Therefore, the primary goal of this review is to examine social support interventions that have been successful in motivating adult cancer survivors to engage in physical activity.

Social support is behavior that assists individuals in achieving desired goals and outcomes (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2005). Several types of social support exist, including social networks (e.g., friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, healthcare professionals, community, culture, religion, media). The type and extent of social support available to an individual influences physical activity engagement.