

The importance of nutrition and physical activity for cancer patients and their caregivers

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It is well known that a healthy diet and physical activity are beneficial to cancer survivorship. But support for the physical and dietary health of

caregivers of cancer patients is just as important and often overlooked. There is significant evidence showing the benefits of physical activity and healthy dietary intake for both cancer patients and their caregivers. A recently published study, led by researchers from Drexel University's College of Nursing and Health Professions, explored physical activity and nutrition-related beliefs, behaviors and challenges of cancer patients and their caregivers, to inform future development of wellness interventions for both groups.

Published in *Rehabilitation Oncology*, the study revealed similarities in [cancer patients'](#) and their caregivers' beliefs about the importance of physical activity, as well as barriers they face participating in physical activity.

Participants of the study responded to a survey and interviews about the importance of physical activity for stress management, but also the tendency of caregivers to focus on the activity needs of the patient rather than their own. Patient-[caregiver](#) pairs reported similar barriers to physical activity including fatigue and time constraints. The research team noted the benefit of exercise for fatigue management and mental health continues to be an important educational interest and need among patients and caregivers.

"Our findings suggest that patient-caregiver pairs should be engaged, together, in research and interventions, as their interactions are instrumental in promoting sustainable lifestyle changes," said Brandy-Joe Milliron, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Nutrition Sciences Department in the College and lead author of the study.

While patients and caregivers found agreement in physical activity, the dietary priorities of patients and caregivers were contrasting in many cases because of different nutrition-related priorities. Caregivers were significantly more likely to be pursuing weight loss, while patients

reported trying to maintain or gain weight.

Although, when the patients taste and appetite decreased because of treatment, the patient and caregiver often ate food that was comforting and palatable. The research team noted interventions for both patient and caregiver should also provide strategies for maintaining personal nutrition-related goals when facing conflicting priorities between patients and caregivers.

"Future research is needed to develop dyadic (patient-caregiver) interventions that harness the influential role that each member of the pair holds, while simultaneously being responsive to their unique needs," said Milliron.

Jonathan Deutsch, Ph.D., co-author and professor in the Food and Hospitality Management Department in the College, added that they found that the needs, priorities and tastes of patients and caregivers were divergent but there were commonalities in high levels of stress, fatigue and a tendency to make convenient, but not always nutritious, choices.

"Our findings underscore the importance of culinary nutrition that can offer convenient and tasty solutions for individualized needs," said Deutsch. "Particularly, caregivers want to learn culinary techniques, strategies and recipes that are quick and easy."

Milliron noted that nutrition interventions should focus on addressing barriers to healthful eating such as fatigue, lack of time and managing complex dynamics of caring for someone with cancer, as well as clarifying the evidence supporting the dietary recommendations for healthy cancer prevention and survivorship and implementing the those recommendations.

For the mixed method study, 102 participants (50 cancer patients who

were undergoing cancer treatment and 52 caregivers) completed surveys and in-depth interviews. Surveys collected information about participant demographic and [personal characteristics](#), cancer and caregiving characteristics, pre- and post-diagnosis activity and dietary behaviors, as well as factors that influence those behaviors.

Additionally, participants were asked about their preferences for physical activity and dietary interventions. Interviews further explored participant [physical activity](#) and nutrition-related beliefs, behaviors and challenges, and changes since diagnosis.

More information: Lora Packel et al, Physical Activity and Nutrition-Related Beliefs, Behaviors, and Challenges in Individuals Living With Cancer and Their Caregivers, *Rehabilitation Oncology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1097/01.REO.0000000000000318](#)

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