

Exercise Interventions for Cancer Survivorship

Emily Fenton, Yale Cancer Center

Melinda Irwin, PhD, Associate Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at Yale School of Medicine, and a member of Yale Cancer Center, has recently received a grant funded by the Connecticut Challenge to perform a research study focused on cancer survivorship. Dr. Irwin's proposal, along with three others, was chosen to receive funding. Dr. Irwin's study looks at how nutrition and exercise counseling after cancer treatment affects cancer survivorship.

Dr. Irwin's research will determine whether cancer survivors randomized to receive exercise and nutrition counseling through the Connecticut Challenge Survivorship Clinic experience favorable changes in exercise, nutrition, body composition, and quality of life compared to cancer survivors who receive their counseling three months later. A total of 100 participants (50 per group) will be followed for 3 months. The research mainly focuses on men and women recently diagnosed with breast, colon, prostate, and endometrial cancers, as these are most commonly associated with exercise and diet. "We hope that with the results from this study, behavior and lifestyle counseling will become a routine part of the cancer treatment process," Dr. Irwin explained.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 30% of cancer deaths are due to improper nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle. Physical activity, poor diet, and obesity are estimated to affect approximately 50-75% of cancer survivors. "Because of statistics like these, lifestyle changes to correct these factors are expected to have a major impact on cancer survival. Many studies have already shown that there is a benefit to physical activity in reducing the risk of recurrence," Dr. Irwin said. Dr. Irwin will be working on the study along with Dr. Kenneth Miller, Director of the Connecticut Challenge Survivorship Clinic at Yale Cancer Center; their goal is to make survivorship programs, like the one at Yale, a permanent part of the cancer treatment process.

Dr. Irwin has already received some preliminary information regarding the study. "Based on our screening and recruitment phone calls, I have learned that more cancer patients prefer to receive these programs soon after diagnosis, either prior to or during treatment, rather than after finishing treatment, and that cancer patients prefer one long session (e.g., 3-4 hrs) rather than a program that involves weekly one-hour sessions over a handful of weeks," Dr. Irwin said. She hopes to have all data collected by February 2009, and is currently recruiting participants.

Cancer survivorship is a new, yet very important aspect of the cancer treatment process. Once a patient has finished cancer treatment, it is often very hard for them to return to everyday life. Dr. Irwin's study, along with the three others that received funding from the Connecticut Challenge, aim to provide a better understanding of the benefits of ongoing support for cancer survivors.

For more information on the cancer survivorship exercise and nutrition study, please call Melinda Irwin, PhD at (203) 785.6392.