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# Influence and Support for Childhood Cancer Survivor's Participation in Physical Activity

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to explore childhood cancer survivor's social support for physical activity (PA) during and after cancer treatment as well as the type of support they desired. **Methods:** Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with childhood cancer survivors (n=7). Data were analyzed through the process of immersion/crystallization. **Results:** All survivors noted a decrease in PA during treatment. All survivors expressed a desire to return back to "normal" PA levels after treatment. Survivors reported they received general support from parents, physicians, and peers at cancer oncology camps. Most survivors expressed a desire to develop support networks with other childhood cancer survivors when increasing PA levels post cancer treatment. **Discussion:** Survivors expressed that they had support for PA but desired more. Future research should explore the impact of physician support for PA as well as studying the impact of PA support groups for childhood cancer survivors.

## INTRODUCTION

There are more than 380,000 childhood (1-14 years) and adolescent (15-19 years) cancer survivors in the United States and due to advancements in cancer treatment this number continues to rise. A childhood cancer survivor's life can be greatly impacted by the adverse late effects caused by cancer treatment. These can include: obesity, osteoporosis, limited muscular strength, balance problems, chronic fatigue, cardiovascular disease, sleep problems, diabetes, and psychosocial issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress, and fear of recurrence). These effects can cause serious chronic disease later in life and can even lead to death. A health behavior that has been linked to numerous health benefits is PA. With the benefits of adequate PA levels, childhood cancer survivors can improve health and reduce the late effects of cancer treatment therefore promoting survivors longevity. Levels of PA in childhood cancer patients decrease during treatment and typically do not return to recommended levels after treatment cessation. Since PA can reduce latent cancer effects and improve quality of life post cancer treatment, it is important to understand the type of social support childhood cancer survivors need to improve their PA levels post treatment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore childhood cancer survivor's social support for PA during and after cancer treatment as well as the type of support they desired.

## METHODS

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with seven female childhood cancer survivors. All women were cancer free at the time of the interview. Survivors were recruited from the Make-a-Wish Foundation network in Nebraska, social media posts in local area childhood cancer support groups, and by word of mouth. Survivors received a \$15 gift card as compensation for participating in the study. Interviews were conducted confidentially in person or over Skype, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data were then analyzed through the process of immersion/crystallization to identify trends and commonalities in the interviews.

## RESULTS

- The mean age of participants was 21 years with an age range from 16 to 24 years old.
- All survivors noted they stopped being active during cancer treatment.
- Support for PA from parents was noted by all survivors. The encouragement was often to help them return to previous PA levels.
  - I remember my mom being the one pushing me to eat better and exercising. I remember being mad about it because, it was the last thing I wanted to do at the time. She was always pushing me to get out of bed. I remember it being really irritating at the time, like you know looking back it was definitely important and something that I needed to be pushed in that way.*
- Several survivors (n=3) reported their physicians were supportive when discussing PA but their physicians did not provide clear guidelines or suggestions for how to re-establish adequate PA levels.
  - I mean, that's always the first thing that she says, is that you look great, like you look like you feel great, like your vitals, like you know, like overall your vitals are awesome you're taking good care of yourself, you're exercising like, just yeah. Continually, give that positive encouragement.*
- Some survivors (n=4) noted little to no support for PA from their physician.
- Several survivors (n=3) expressed that they did not want to attend the childhood cancer support groups available at the hospital.
  - Um, I don't know. Just because, I think my family was just really eager to go back to our normal lives and um, I do feel like kind of at times [I] kind of wanted to feel like it never happened.*

## RESULTS

- A majority of survivors (n=5) attended camps for childhood cancer patients and survivors. These survivors expressed they received peer support from other survivors and feelings of normalcy from attending these camps.
  - ...I think that just having like to go to the camp and maybe make those friends then at least you feel like you've got these friends... someone you can talk to or, write to and they would understand what you're going through and move you through this journey a little bit*
  - It kind of gave me the chance to just kind of forget about treatment for now and be a normal kid.*
- In relation to PA, survivors who were currently physically participated in PA because they wanted to stay in shape (n=2) or felt it was important for their long-term health (n=3).
- All survivors expressed cancer had an impact on how they view life.
  - I definitely think it matures you very quickly. I just felt like a different person when I came back. Um, I don't know I just felt like I was on a different level as other kids.*
- Survivors also felt that being a childhood cancer survivor had different implications than if they had been an adult survivor. All expressed the value of survivorship and health in the remainder of their lives.
  - I guess just, realizing how much of my life that I still have and where as if I were an adult you don't have as much of life left to live and be around.*

## Discussion

Survivors expressed that they had support for PA after cancer treatment, primarily from their parents. Physician support was noted by several survivors, but details about how to be active was lacking. Future research could explore the impact of physician support for PA post cancer treatment. Even though some survivors explicitly stated not wanting to attend cancer support groups, camps for childhood cancer survivors were seen as a positive method of support and a way for them to feel "normal." Given these camps are only offered periodically, future research is needed on how to build a similar environment that is available year-round. Potentially, a PA group designed for childhood cancer survivors could provide support for survivors and help them to establish healthy levels of PA for life after cancer. More research is needed on the impact of a PA support group on PA and social support for childhood cancer survivors.