How to keep active with cancer?

Cancer survivors’ experiences of a tailored exercise programme CUFITTER™: results of an explorative survey

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Background
Cancer will affect 4 million people in the UK by 2030.¹ Growing evidence suggests that regular physical activity (PA) or exercise may reduce treatment-related symptoms and risk of cancer recurrence, and improve recovery, quality of life and survival rates.²,³ However, PA levels often decline following a cancer diagnosis and adherence to the UK PA guidelines (150 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week) is low.⁴ Disease and treatment side-effects, older age, and lack of knowledge or confidence are frequently identified as barriers to exercise.⁵,⁶ Other factors include low referral rates, lack of patient education or advice from healthcare professionals (HCPs),⁷,⁸ Supervised PA programmes tailored to individual needs and preferences could support and motivate cancer survivors to become or stay more active.

Methods
Study aim: to describe the experiences of people attending CUFITTER™, a tailored programme for those in cancer recovery. It offers various classes and 1-to-1 sessions with qualified trainers at low cost in a specially designed facility or at venues visited by trainers (pop-up gyms).

Study design: survey with convenience sampling examining demographic/health status, exercise awareness, information provision, previous/current PA levels (Godin-Shephard questionnaire⁹), barriers/benefits to PA, lifestyle changes, future intentions, and use of wearable technology.

Results
★ 60 surveys were evaluated of 67/100 returned
★ Sample characteristics - 60% female, 68% >60 years, 62% partnered, 47% ≥ sixth form education, 15% employed, 66% breast or prostate cancer, 67% on cancer treatment (10% chemotherapy, 48% hormone therapy), 62% comorbidity (top 3: hypertension, arthritis, diabetes)
★ Exercise awareness and information provision -
  • 52% were aware of UK guidelines for PA
  • 57% received verbal advice - from their specialist nurse, 32%; hospital doctor, 23%; GP, 12%
  • 74% read information about exercise - leaflets from cancer charities: Macmillan, 32%; Cancer Research UK, 25%; or the hospital, 17%
  • 32% used the internet to search for exercise information, mainly charity websites
★ CUFITTER™ use -
  • information about programme provided by - HCPs, 38%; advertising, 20%; friends, 15%
  • 68% attended classes for ≤ 6 months, usually once (48%) or twice (37%) per week
  • 75% travel ≤ 5 miles to classes
  • main reasons for joining: to improve health after treatment, 54%; to access knowledgeable trainers, 23%; to exercise with people in a similar situation, 20%
★ Self reported PA levels - PA levels were higher (p ≤0.05), and frequency of strenuous exercise increased (p <0.01) since joining the programme
★ Barriers and benefits of PA - main barrier: physical impact of cancer/cancer treatment, 35%; main benefit: regaining/improving health or fitness, 42%
★ Healthier lifestyle – 67% made other lifestyle changes: healthy eating, 70%; stress management, 35%; alcohol reduction, 25%
★ Future PA plans – stay active, 48%; increase PA, 33%; extend/resume PA to other facilities, 15%
★ Use of technology –
  • 25% used a digital fitness tool (wearables, pedometers) to track PA or monitor progress
  • 53% would be interested in using these tools in the future

Conclusions
★ Exercise as a standard part of cancer care via social prescribing needs further investigation
★ Tailoring exercise to individual needs and having easily available community-based programmes may engage and support people with cancer to stay active
★ Development of formal PA guidelines for this population needs to be prioritised


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