

Psychosocial Support for Cancer Survivors Needs Strengthening

Arlanta 2007/05/14 -While one in four cancer survivors participates in a support group after diagnosis, use of support groups varies considerably by cancer type, and few survivors receive referrals to such programs from their physicians, according to a new study. Published in the June 15, 2007 issue of *CANCER*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Cancer Society, the study finds that cancer survivors are more likely to attend a support group compared to people with other chronic conditions, but there is little active support for such use by treating physicians. Utilization among cancer survivors differs depending on factors such as gender, age, health insurance and other co-morbid conditions.

The psychosocial burden of cancer is well recognized but seems to be poorly managed by many physicians. Support groups for a variety of cancers and other chronic conditions are widely available across the United States. They often are the only mental care and external disease information resource cancer patients have. While previous studies have shown about one in five women with early stage breast cancer use support services in the year following treatment (18 percent), little is known regarding participation in support groups and support group use among patients with different types of cancer and for cancer survivors.

Dr. Jason Owen of Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California and co-investigators sought to comprehensively characterize how patients with different types of cancers and other chronic medical conditions use support groups and who uses them. The study team analyzed survey data from 9,187 participants (1,844 with cancer and 4,951 with other chronic health problems).

Dr Owen and his team found that only one in seven (14 percent) patients with a non-cancer, chronic medical condition accessed support groups while almost one in four (23 percent) cancer patients did. Only 11 percent of cancer patients used a cancer-specific support group. Patients with blood malignancies and breast cancer were more likely to report participation in a support group compared to those with lung and skin cancers.

Interestingly, predictors of use were similar across various cancer sites and included female gender, Caucasian race, higher education level, and symptoms of depression or anxiety. Younger age and urban residence did not predict support group use. While physical functional status did not predict use among cancer patients, it did among patients with other chronic conditions.

Dr. Owen also found that while physicians passively supported patient use of support groups, only one in ten cancer patients in this study had received a physician recommendation.

Dr. Owen concludes, "This study sheds light on which individuals with cancer use these services." This study will help clinicians recognize the importance of support groups for cancer patients. "Assistance in identifying and accessing support groups should be a standard of care for all patients receiving curative, follow-up, or palliative care for cancer," Dr. Owen recommends.

Article: "Use of Health-Related and Cancer-Specific Support Groups Among Adult Cancer Survivors," Jason E. Owen, Michael S. Goldstein, Jennifer Lee, Nancy Breen, Julia H. Rowland, *CANCER*; Published Online: May 14, 2007 (DOI: 10.1002/cncr.22719); Print Issue Date: June 15, 2007.

