

Exercise

IMPACT ON FAMILY CAREGIVERS

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SUMMARY: Mental and physical wellbeing

Cuthbert CA, Tapp DN, King-Shier K, et al. A mixed-methods approach to understanding the impact of exercise in cancer family caregivers. 2017 CAPO Conference, Vancouver, BC.

This study examines a holistic approach to supporting family caregivers through physical activity and knowledge translation. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) for cancer family caregivers was conducted, entitled “Renewing caregiver health and wellbeing through exercise (RECHARGE).”

RECHARGE participants (n=77) were randomized to either a group-based exercise intervention (n=38) or a waitlist control (n=39) group. The physical activity intervention involved 12 weeks of group-based resistance training twice per week and 150 minutes of independent aerobic training, in addition to biweekly health education seminars. Over a

10-month time period, family caregivers were recruited through the Tom Baker Cancer Centre to participate in this mixed-methods study. Physical functioning (primary outcome) and physical activity levels and psychologic wellbeing (secondary outcomes) were measured for quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative analysis of in-person interviews.

At baseline, no significant differences were observed between the two groups. Compared to normative data, both groups exhibited higher anxiety levels, poorer sleep, and decreased mental health quality of life. Upon completing the 12-week physical activity intervention, those in the exercise group had statistically significant improvements in the mental health component of quality of life, increased exercise levels, and increased six-minute walk test results compared to the waitlist control group.

COMMENTARY: Cancer affects both patients and their families. Family caregivers play a significant role that impacts not only the family, but also the healthcare system and society. Currently, there are 900,000 Canadians acting as caregivers for family members.¹ These family caregivers are responsible for providing up to 50% of care required by patients.² The cost impact represents savings to healthcare of \$25 billion per year.³ However, it also means these family members are burdened with increased responsibility and hours of care.

Family caregivers are at increased risk for a range of physical and mental health concerns, including increased

rates of heart disease and stroke,⁴ higher rates of sleep disturbance,⁵ increased anxiety and depression,⁶ lack of time/energy for physical activity,⁷ and increased reliance on unhealthy behaviors.⁸ Physical activity is known to have a pleiotropic positive effect on mental and physical health.

RECHARGE examined the physical and psychologic effects of a structured exercise program designed for cancer family caregivers. In addition to finding significant improvements in the experimental exercise group compared to the waitlist control group, a qualitative component further revealed the benefits and value in having exercise programs available to support family caregivers. Common themes from interviews included: 1) the context of caregiving framed caregivers perspectives; 2) caregivers valued the program and exercising; 3) they experienced fun and positivity through exercise; 4) they enjoyed the group format and camaraderie with other caregivers; 5) they noticed improvements to their physical health and mental wellbeing; and 6) they felt better able to cope.

The results of this study demonstrate the need for, and positive uptake of, exercise interventions to support caregiver physical and mental health. It recommends that the standard of care incorporate exercise programs for these vulnerable populations. Family caregivers may require different types of support at different times along the cancer trajectory, and it is therefore important to tailor interventions to meet caregivers’ unique and changing needs.

Future directions include exploring recruitment strategies to target family caregivers who may not have expressed interest in physical activity programs, examining the preferences of these individuals to exercise with or without their patients, and comparing the effect of group-based versus home-based programs. RECHARGE participants expressed

IN BRIEF

Already known

- Family caregivers are at risk for physical and mental health problems.
- Physical activity has a positive effect on physical and mental health.

What this study showed

- An exercise program geared to family caregivers improved self-reported physical and mental wellbeing and coping ability.

Next steps

- Explore recruitment strategies to reach family caregivers.
- Understand preferences for different types of program.

positive feedback for exercising without their patients, though caregiving responsibilities often represented a barrier to participation. Previous research supports the benefits of group-based exercise in increasing social support and exercise adherence rates.

The significant body of research available on cancer family caregivers and physical activity helps us to better understand family supportive care, health and wellness resources, and caregivers themselves. Family caregivers provide an important service to the healthcare system that goes largely unrecognized. Moving towards greater support for these members of society is important to help them improve their own health status, and their ability to serve their loved one.

References:

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