

Behavioral Risk Factors

A guide for oncology nurses counseling patients

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BACKGROUND: Although many genetic and environmental causes of cancer are uncontrollable, individuals can choose behaviors that significantly increase or reduce their risk for cancer.

OBJECTIVES: This article discusses known cancer-protective behaviors, including exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight, vaccinating against cancer-associated viruses, and minimizing exposure to tobacco products, alcohol, processed meats, and ultraviolet light.

METHODS: The author performed a review of guidelines and techniques for counseling patients about risky behaviors, with an emphasis on patients with cancer.

FINDINGS: Much remains to be learned about the most effective clinical interventions for encouraging patients to adopt healthy behaviors, but oncology nurses should become familiar with the fundamental principles of counseling patients about health-promoting behaviors.

KEYWORDS

prevention; behavior change; risk factors; oncology; counseling

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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THE AGE-ADJUSTED U.S. CANCER DEATH RATE has improved in recent decades, declining from 208.3 per 100,000 people in 1982 to 152.6 per 100,000 people in 2017 (Howlader et al., 2020). Although much of that improvement stems from innovative treatments and screening programs, Desai and Gyawali (2020) believe that much of the credit belongs to collective efforts to prevent cancer from arising in the first place. For example, public health campaigns have driven down the smoking rate, which has contributed to a significant decline in the incidence of lung cancer (Holford et al., 2014). Avoiding tobacco is just one of several behaviors that are known to significantly reduce an individual's risk of developing cancer. Other cancer-protective behaviors include minimizing sun exposure, engaging in physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding processed meats, vaccinating against cancer-associated viruses, and limiting alcohol consumption. Oncology nurses who are well versed in these risk factors can develop skills to counsel patients about health-promoting behaviors.

Not all cases of cancer are driven by individual choices. The dominant cause of many cancers is genetics (Mahon, 2018). In addition, many environmental and occupational carcinogens, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, asbestos, and heavy metals, can only be eliminated through collective action and structural reform, not individual behaviors (Malhotra & Boffetta, 2020). Exposure to industrial pollutants and other environmental carcinogens is also shaped by patterns of racism and housing discrimination (Grineski et al., 2017). Nurses counseling patients about risk reduction should keep these complexities in mind and take care not to provoke shame or self-blame. At the same time, patients deserve plain-spoken information about risk factors that are within the scope of their individual behaviors. This article focuses on providing nurses with basic concepts and skills for counseling patients about cancer-protective behaviors.

Background

Persuading patients or oneself to adopt health-promoting behaviors and habits can be challenging. Nursing theorists, such as Dorothea Orem and Nola J. Pender, have written extensively about the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal dimensions that shape behavioral choices among individuals (Wang, 2001). During the early 1980s, psychologist William R. Miller