Social Isolation Among Individuals With Cancer

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The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the social isolation of individuals with cancer. Studies about how to address social isolation among patients with cancer are limited, yet data from other high-risk populations can inform oncology nursing practice. This literature review of evidence-based clinical interventions provides a foundation for clinical oncology nursing practice. With the use of technology, institutional resources, and community resources, oncology nurses can tailor physical activity, psychotherapy, and socialization interventions to reduce the negative psychosocial outcomes of isolation.

AT A GLANCE
- The prevalence of social isolation in individuals with cancer is likely underestimated and undervalued.
- Oncology nurses can reduce negative psychosocial outcomes of social isolation for individuals with cancer.
- By using technological, institutional, and community resources, oncology nurses can tailor simple yet innovative interventions across the care continuum.

Background
Social Isolation Versus Loneliness
Social isolation and loneliness are distinct yet interrelated concepts. Social isolation is “a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts, and [is] deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships” (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1,346). Loneliness is “a need for another person or group that has been disrupted and is discussed in the context of absence or loss” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 175).

Criteria for social isolation are objective, but loneliness is subjective. For example, a patient with neutropenia may be isolated as a precaution in the acute care setting. Although they may not feel lonely, social isolation may be distressing. For some individuals, loneliness may be a negative consequence of social isolation at some point in their illness trajectory. Patients with metastatic disease may have supportive and involved family and may not be socially isolated but may still feel lonely secondary to the underlying serious

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