Young Cancer Survivors Benefit From Strong Social Connections

Scientists plan to develop interventions that use social networks to improve the health outcomes of cancer survivors.

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Having a support system is especially important for people diagnosed with cancer and even cancer survivors. Now, new findings published in the journal Cancer reveal that survivors of adolescent and young adult cancer have stronger social connections compared with their peers, reports St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

For the study, scientists developed a method known as the functional social network index to measure the social networks of 204 survivors of adolescent and young adult cancers ages 18 to 30. (These survivors received their diagnosis between ages 15 and 30.) A second group involving 102 young adults with no cancer history was also tracked.

While cancer survivors were more likely to have stronger emotional and practical support—as well as weight management and physical activity advice—than their non-cancer peers, the strength of such networks varied by diagnosis. Lymphoma survivors had the strongest connections, but survivors of brain and central nervous system malignancies had the weakest. (Their social networks were even weaker than their non-cancer peers. Researchers conjectured that this might be due to treatment-related neurocognitive problems that might impair communication.)

Survivors who had a higher social network index had better coping skills, which included less denial, greater use of emotional and practical support and planning for their future.

"A lack of social connections with friends and relatives is associated with poor quality of life, risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions and premature death," said I-Chan Huang, PhD, an associate member of the St. Jude Department of Epidemiology and Cancer Control and the study's lead investigator. "Once we identify the mechanism between social connections and health outcomes, we can start designing interventions to use social networks to improve health outcomes of cancer survivors."

Researchers also plan to make their index more efficient and effective to help health care providers measure support available to cancer survivors regardless of age.

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