

Physical Activity for Cancer Patients: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of General Practitioners

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Introduction

Healthcare professionals' (Oncologists, doctors, and nurses) physical activity (PA) recommendations impact patients living with cancer PA levels. General practitioners (GP's) monitor the overall health of patients living with cancer throughout their treatment journey. This is the first study to explore GP's knowledge, attitudes and practices of PA for patients living with cancer.

Methods

GPs (Table 1) who see patients living with cancer regularly completed a survey based on The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Participants (GP's) reported knowledge, attitudes, perceived behavioural control and subjective norms of PA within the cancer population. GP recommendation and referral rates of PA were reported. Principal component analysis was conducted to establish a set of survey items aligned to TPB constructs (attitude, subjective norms, perceived control), and multiple regression analyses characterised associations between these predictor variables and (a) recommendation; and (b) referral of PA to cancer patients.

Results

GPs (n = 111) recommended PA to 41–60% of their patients and referred 1–20% to PA programs. Multiple regression models significantly predicted the percent of patients recommended PA, $p < .0005$ adj. $R^2 = 0.40$ and referred PA, $p < .0005$, adj. $R^2 = 0.21$. GP attitudes and perceived behavioural control and GP's own activity levels were significant predictors of whether patients were recommended and referred for PA, $p < 0.05$.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Characteristics	Number (%)
Sex	
Male	47(42.34)
Female	64(57.66)
Age (years)	
26–35	13(11.71)
36–45	28(25.23)
46–55	38(34.23)
56–65	25(22.52)
Over 65	7 (6.31)
Participate in regular PA	
Yes	77 (69.37)
No	64(30.63)
Description of activity level	
Vigorously active	5(4.50)
Moderately active	55(49.55)
Seldomly active	51(45.95)
How many years practicing as a GP (years)	
0–10	33(29.73)
11–20	26(23.42)
21–30	38(34.23)
31–40	12(10.81)
41+	2(1.80)
Location of practice	
Urban	58(52.25)
Sub-urban	33(29.73)
Rural	20(18.02)

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Discussion/Conclusions

This is the first study of its kind to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Australian GP's regarding PA for the cancer population. Results offered some support for the TPB, but not all principles were supported. As hypothesised, both perceived behavioural control and attitudes were significant predictors of intentions to both recommend PA and refer patients to PA programs or for exercise specialist advice. Subjective norms, however, were shown to have no correlation with either behaviour, contradicting the hypotheses derived from the TPB. In addition, GP's personal PA participation predicted both the percentage of patients recommended to do PA and referred to PA programs or for further support by an exercise specialist.

It is well understood by GP's that it is part of their role to be promoting PA to their clients within the cancer population (>85%) and the general population. With the consistent growth of research proving the benefits of PA for patients living with cancer with a reduction of adverse effects from cancer treatments, an emphasis needs to be placed on GP's to promote this message to their patients. The current study suggests that enhancing the psychological aspects of GP's attitudes and perceived behavioural control towards PA could create a positive impact on the percentage of patients living with cancer both recommended and referred for PA.

References

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Take home messages

- GP's are in a highly influential position and could improve the uptake of PA in people living with cancer
- Even though the GP's in this study were reportedly active and believed in PA for the cancer population, they were not likely to refer their clients for PA or for exercise specialist advice