

Advanced Cancer: What is the Role of Cancer Rehabilitation?

CANCER Awareness Week
REHAB 7th-13th September 2020
no one should miss out

"I am doing something to keep well and that feels really good in a situation where cancer makes me feel very powerless...I can get out to the gym, I can walk, I can make my heart rate increase and I can strengthen my limbs as much as I am able. I have control over these things in a situation where there is little else I can control" Diane, living with advanced cancer.

There are many people in our communities living with advanced cancer, and due to advances in treatments they are living for much longer than ever before. This is making 'living well' during the years after a life limited diagnosis more vitally important to address. Despite a growing interest around what constitutes 'quality of life' for those with such a diagnosis, the majority of this expanding sector of the population are still missing out on cancer rehabilitation.



The seeming discrepancy between advanced cancer and cancer rehabilitation is often due to the lack of understanding of what it is, and what it has to offer. This lack of understanding may make cancer rehab seem inappropriate and perhaps insignificant as a component of 'living well' for patients with advanced cancer who are contemplating and actioning end of life decisions.

However, studies have found that some of the most distressing concerns for the advanced cancer population are functional decline, dependency and uncontrolled symptoms ⁽¹⁾. Symptom burden has been identified as the greatest contributor to a lower quality of life ⁽²⁾. These studies, and others are the reason why identifying and treating sources of functional compromise that can be minimized or eliminated, is absolutely necessary for those with advanced cancer. These are the aspects of 'living well' where participation in cancer rehabilitation can offer the biggest impacts. The areas of decline that cannot be eliminated and are inevitably experienced by those with advancing cancer can often be decelerated by participation in cancer rehabilitation, meaning that functional decline does not have to go hand in hand with helplessness ⁽³⁾.

Cancer rehabilitation's role in palliative care

Palliative care is known for its multidisciplinary symptom-oriented approach that acknowledges the unique experience of the patient. It often involves creative problem solving and psychology and is guided by what the patient defines as 'quality of life'. Cancer rehabilitation shares these same therapeutic emphases, further highlighting why it has an important role to play as an integrated part of a palliative care pathway.



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What are the goals of cancer rehabilitation in advanced cancer?

Cancer rehabilitation aims to improve function where the patient has capacity, to maintain function where illness or treatment threaten decline, or ease the transition towards functional decline when deterioration is inevitable ⁽⁴⁾⁽⁵⁾. For the most positive impact cancer rehabilitation should be approached as a preventative element rather than a functional crisis intervention.

How can cancer rehabilitation help people with advanced cancer?

Rehabilitative input includes physical exercise, breathlessness management, manual therapy and relaxation. Symptom burden can be reduced by increasing strength, aerobic capacity, balance, mobility, and coordination. Cancer rehabilitation can reduce the risk of falls, improve fatigue and ultimately enable people to remain independent for longer ⁽⁶⁾⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾.

In addition to these physical benefits, studies have found that patients who engaged in exercise rehabilitation felt it gave them a sense of meaning whereby they reclaimed control through active and positive involvement in their own health. If offered a greater choice and the opportunity to prolong independence. It also brought them confidence and hope to face the future ⁽⁹⁾⁽¹⁰⁾. These additional benefits to participation are fundamental elements to 'living well' with advanced cancer and yet sadly in many areas still only 5% of people with a cancer diagnosis are being referred to rehabilitation.

This has to change. No one should miss out!

References:

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Pinc&Steel clinicians are physiotherapists or occupational therapists with specialised training to achieve Certification status with PINC&STEEL Cancer Rehabilitation International.

Practitioners are required to undertake ongoing and measured CPD to remain Certified. Your nearest PINC (for women with cancer) or STEEL (for men with cancer) provider can be found here: www.pincandsteel.com (NZ) www.au.pincandsteel.com (Australia), www.pincandsteel.uk (UK and Ireland), www.ca.pincandsteel.com (Canada). There are also providers in South Africa, United Arab Emirates, India and Poland.

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