

Getting AYA Patients to Exercise

BY MARY SHARON CURRAN, RN, MS; ELIZABETH SAYLOR, MSW; and LAURA SCRUGGS

Despite undisputed physical and psychological benefits of post-treatment exercise for cancer patients throughout therapy and survivorship, there is still a need for more evidence of ways to best recruit or direct survivors into these programs—particularly young adult survivors. As these survivors balance cancer (and its treatment and effects) with their relationships, careers, and education plans, regular physical activity may sink down the priority list.

Although physical activity is strongly linked to improved health-related quality of life in young adult cancer survivors, research has found that only half of this group of survivors are meeting public health guidelines—and nearly a quarter of the group are completely sedentary.¹

Patients have reported the adverse physical effects of their cancers, such as fatigue, pain, anemia, depression, and nausea, as factors making them less likely to exercise.² And, studies have also shown that a majority of cancer survivors are not consistently engaged in the recommended levels of physical activity, resulting in greater disease risk and health care costs.³

To address this unmet survivor need, the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults

cer—uses sport as a therapeutic intervention to enhance social and emotional connections among young adult cancer survivors.

UCF's "Cancer to 5K" program is a free, progressive, 12-week run/walk program designed to introduce or reintroduce cancer survivors to physical activity. The program is one example of how engaging in group-training and physical activity programs can increase both the practice of exercising regularly and the sense of control that is lost after diagnosis—dramatically improving the overall survivorship experience for young adult cancer survivors.



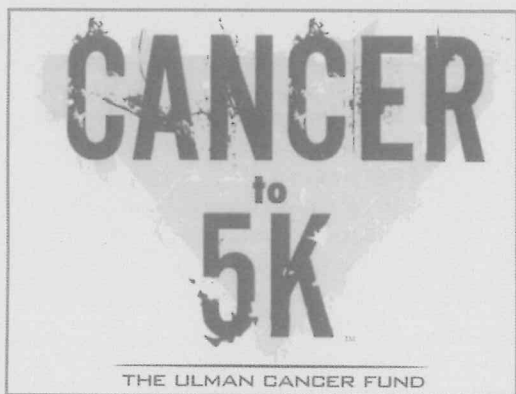
MARY SHARON CURRAN, RN, MS, Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Nursing at Towson University, serves as a patient navigator for young adults at the Ulman Cancer Fund, and has been in the role since 2005. She has encouraged patient participation in the Cancer to 5K program, as well as participating herself as a runner.



ELIZABETH SAYLOR, MSW, Program Director for the Ulman Cancer Fund's Young Adult Patient Navigation Program at the University of Maryland Greenebaum Cancer Center, was part of the pilot Cancer to 5K program in 2007.



LAURA SCRUGGS, Program Manager for Mission Engagement at the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults, has been with the organization since 2011. She manages many of the UCF survivorship and community engagement programs, including Cancer to 5K.



The Program

The program was founded in 2007 by Holly Shoemaker, a young adult survivor of metastatic melanoma. While undergoing chemotherapy, she found that maintaining a regular running/walking regimen improved her tolerance of side effects and enhanced her sense of self dramatically.

Cancer to 5K is now open to young adult cancer survivors, regardless of physical fitness level or treatment status. Training sessions are implemented twice per calendar year, spring and fall. Certified vol-

unteer coaches, some of whom are young adult cancer survivors themselves, develop training plans and lead group workouts twice each week.

Every survivor participant is coached based on his or her specific level of fitness and receives individual guidance and encouragement from experienced volunteer runners ("sherpas") throughout the program. No participant trains or races alone. Twelve weeks into the program, the entire team runs a 5K road race.

Cancer to 5K is currently being implemented in four locations in the mid-Atlantic region—Baltimore, Md., Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia, Howard County, Md., and Montgomery County, Md.—with plans to expand to New York and Chicago. In the past two years, the program has expanded to address the national need for this type of

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(UCF)—a Baltimore-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting, educating, and connecting young adults impacted by can-

cer survivors, regardless of physical fitness level or treatment status. Training sessions are implemented twice per calendar year, spring and fall. Certified vol-

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program, and UCF now provides individualized online coaching for interested young adult survivors living outside the mid-Atlantic region.

The Survivors

Since the program began in 2007, a total of 80 survivors have completed the Cancer to 5K training program, and by the end of 2013, that number is expected to grow to 95. In the spring 2013 season,

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five participants were undergoing active treatment, 16 were less than two years out of treatment, and two were long-term survivors. Participants' cancer diagnoses included thyroid, breast, blood, colon, ovarian, testicular, brain, head and neck, liver, and pancreatic cancers, and melanoma.

Participants are recruited primarily by UCF's patient navigators, who connect with patients and their families from the time of a patient's diagnosis or early in a



Kelley Schaub (UCF)

Twelve weeks into the Cancer to 5K program, the entire team runs a 5K road race. These runners are participating in last spring's Purple Stride 5K in Washington, D.C.

patient's treatment to build supportive relationships over the full course of care. Having a direct link to patients onsite in cancer centers is key to engage cancer patients and survivors in post treatment exercise programs.

Outcomes

According to self-reported feedback after the spring 2013 season, all of the participants reported improved physical fitness and increased knowledge of running and fitness. Outcomes data from previous seasons of Cancer to 5K programming reveal that participants are likely to continue their involvement with the UCF sports and fitness events, as well as social and service activities. Of the spring 2013 Cancer to 5K participants, 94 percent reported that they intended to continue their involvement with UCF.

The positive feedback from survivor participants and the increasing demand for the expansion of the Cancer to 5K program to different locations provides evidence that there is a need for similar

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community-based programs nationally that address and support the unique physical and psychological needs of young adult cancer patients and survivors. ☐

More OT Articles on AYA Survivors...

For even more research on current gaps in oncology care for adolescents and young adults who are being treated for cancer or are cancer survivors, check out these recent OT articles:

- "IOM Focuses on Gap in Care for Adolescents and Young Adults with Cancer," by Peggy Eastman

(8/25/13 issue)—<http://bit.ly/OT-IOM-AYA>

- "The Survivorship Care Gap: After Childhood and AYA Cancers, How to Keep Survivors in Follow-Up Care," by Sarah DiGiulio (9/25/13 issue)—<http://bit.ly/OT-Survivorship-ChildAYA>

References

1. Belanger LJ et al: Physical activity and health related quality of life in young adult cancer survivors: a Canadian provincial survey. *Journal of Cancer Survivorship* 2011;5:44-53
2. Haas BK et al: Community-Based FitSTEPS for Life Exercise Program for Persons with Cancer: 5-Year Evaluation. *Journal of Oncology Practice* 2012;8:320-324
3. Irwin ML: Physical activity interventions for cancer survivors. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2009;43:32-38