Needs and Lifestyle Challenges of Adolescents and Young Adults With Cancer: Summary of an Institute of Medicine and Livestrong Foundation Workshop

Casey L. Daniel, PhD, MPH, Karen M. Emmons, PhD, Karen Fasciano, PsyD, Brenda Nevidjon, MSN, RN, FAAN, Bernard F. Fuemmeler, PhD, MPH, and Wendy Demark-Wahnefried, PhD, RD

Background: Among adolescents and young adults (AYAs) in the United States, cancer is the leading cause of disease-related death. AYA survivors face numerous short- and long-term health and psychosocial issues, as well as increased risk for behavioral and lifestyle challenges, including poor diet, low physical activity (PA), and substance abuse. Many of these behaviors are modifiable, but gaps in care serve as barriers for AYA survivors.

Objectives: The purpose of this article is to (a) raise awareness of AYAs’ increased risk for poor diet, low PA, and substance abuse; (b) examine previous interventions addressing these issues; and (c) provide recommendations for future directions.

Methods: This article summarizes a workshop coordinated by the Institute of Medicine and the Livestrong Foundation to address AYA survivors’ needs and ways to enhance their quality of care.

Findings: Oncology nurses can promote the inclusion of lifestyle behaviors in survivorship care plans of AYA patients and serve as a valuable resource in improving AYA care on a larger scale. In addition, oncology nurse researchers may offer greater understanding of AYA patients’ and survivors’ needs and best practices by conducting much-needed research with this understudied population.

Casey L. Daniel, PhD, MPH, is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, MA; Karen M. Emmons, PhD, is the vice president of research at the Kaiser Foundation Research Institute in Oakland, CA; Karen Fasciano, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, MA; Brenda Nevidjon, MSN, RN, FAAN, is the chief executive officer of the Oncology Nursing Society in Pittsburgh, PA; Bernard F. Fuemmeler, PhD, MPH, is an associate professor in the Department of Community and Family Medicine at the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, NC; and Wendy Demark-Wahnefried, PhD, RD, is a professor and the Webb Chair of the Department of Nutrition Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. The study was supported, in part, by grants from the National Cancer Institute (Nos. SR25CA057711, R21CA155965, and SR25CA047888). The content of this article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the independent peer reviewers or editorial staff. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Oncology Nursing Society or the Institute of Medicine, its committees, or its convening activities. Daniel can be reached at casey_daniel@dfci.harvard.edu, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org. (Submitted December 2014. Revision submitted February 2015. Accepted for publication February 13, 2015.)

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Cancer is the leading cause of disease-related death among adolescents and young adults (AYAs) (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2014). An estimated 70,000 AYAs aged from 15–39 years are diagnosed with cancer annually, which is eight times more than children younger than age 15 years (Zebrack, Mathews-Bradshaw, & Siegel, 2010). AYA survivors face numerous short- and long-term health and psychosocial issues (Oeffinger et al., 2006; Robison et al., 2005). These individuals are also at increased risk for many behavioral and lifestyle challenges, such as low physical activity (PA), poor diet, and substance abuse (Klosky et al., 2012). However, these challenges can be addressed through educational and behavioral interventions.

Unfortunately, a significant gap exists for AYA patients because few cancer treatment and survivorship programs tend to their needs. NCI has recognized this as a health disparity requiring special attention (Zebrack et al., 2010). A key challenge is that AYAs do not fit neatly into either adult or pediatric oncology.