

# Examining Contributors to Intent to Continue Exercising in Patients With Cancer in Rehabilitation

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**BACKGROUND:** Exercise is physiologically and psychologically beneficial to cancer survivors, leading to an increase in supervised exercise programs targeting this population. However, more than half of survivors who are offered a supervised exercise program do not complete it.

**OBJECTIVES:** The purpose of this study was to determine which factors influence survivors' decisions to continue exercising in or outside of a supervised exercise program using the theory of planned behavior (TPB).

**METHODS:** Survivors who graduated from an oncology rehabilitation program at a community hospital in the Midwest within a six-month period completed a survey on the TPB items of intention, perceived behavior control, attitude, and subjective norm, as well as demographic information.

**FINDINGS:** Participation in the oncology rehabilitation program demonstrated significant improvements in health and well-being. Bivariate analysis revealed that attitude and subjective norm were significantly related to and more important than perceived behavior control in survivors' intention to exercise. Oncology rehabilitation programs can foster more positive attitudes toward exercise and encourage participant renewal.

## KEYWORDS

rehabilitation; survivorship; exercise; theory of planned behavior; oncology

## DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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**CANCER SURVIVORS, THOSE BOTH ACTIVELY IN TREATMENT** and in remission, are a growing part of the U.S. population (Rim et al., 2016). By 2030, the number of cancer survivors in the United States is expected to be at least 22.2 million (National Cancer Institute, 2020). In recent years, the American College of Sports Medicine convened an interprofessional roundtable to provide consensus guidelines for exercise for cancer survivors based on the overwhelming evidence of the beneficial effects of exercise in this population (Buffart et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2019; Dhawan et al., 2019; Juvet et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). In particular, the literature provides strong evidence in support of the following beneficial effects of exercise: reduced anxiety, fewer depressive symptoms, less fatigue, and better quality of life, as well as improved perceived physical function and actual physical function (Buffart et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2018). Although not necessarily a new idea (Smith, 1996), clinicians, including oncology nurses, are being called to engage in encouraging exercise in cancer survivors through referrals, collaboration with exercise professionals, and supervised exercise programs (Schmitz et al., 2019).

Because of the myriad of benefits of exercise for cancer survivors, the number of supervised exercise programs specifically targeting this group has grown, including those based on the model of cardiac rehabilitation programs (Dittus et al., 2015). However, approximately only half of individuals who are offered supervised exercise programs complete them, and about 50% of older adults in general stop exercising within nine months of completing a supervised exercise program (Jansons et al., 2017). Frequently, survivors' decisions to withdraw from these programs are influenced by medical conditions or personal and social barriers. Specific theory-supported research on what motivates patients to continue participating in these types of programs is limited (Elshahat et al., 2021), particularly research that could identify key areas for targeted intervention by nurses and other members of the healthcare team. The theory of planned behavior, which analyzes the effects of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control on patients' behaviors, was used to examine reasons why cancer survivors may or may not continue to exercise in a hospital-sponsored rehabilitation program (Ajzen, 2002). Although the examination of these factors was grounded in theory, the results of the current study can guide clinical practitioners in the most effective and efficient ways to target patients with cancer for continued exercise participation.