

Nutrition in the Multidisciplinary Oncology Team: Risk Identification and Intervention

SUMMARY

Nutrition services play a key role in quality patient care in the oncology setting. As multidisciplinary teams continue to grow and expand, each member has an opportunity to identify nutrition risks that present throughout the continuum of care. Empowering all team members to play a role in nutrition screening can identify patients in need and help improve outcomes.

SCIENTIST BIOGRAPHY



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PROVIDING QUALITY CARE

The definition of quality care is continuing to evolve in the oncology clinic. Emphasis is being placed on providing holistic care to patients through a multidisciplinary care team approach. The delivery of health care goes beyond treating the immediate disease, in our case cancer, to recognize and treat the whole individual medically, emotionally, financially and physically. To successfully deliver holistic care, all clinical caregivers must actively participate in the multidisciplinary team to identify unique patient needs and direct care that provides guidance and solutions for the patient.

Nutrition education is recognized as a patient need and when provided, can help with patient satisfaction.¹ The importance of providing nutrition services and education has been recognized by leading oncology associations and is now a required part of patient care (See Table).²⁻⁵ The American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer 2012 program standards indicate that a policy must be in place to allow access for nutrition services either on-site or by referral.⁶ The Association of Community Cancer Centers 2012 Cancer Program Guidelines recommends that patients and their families have access to a nutritional professional.³

NUTRITION SERVICES IN THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY ONCOLOGY TEAM

Multidisciplinary team member involvement in nutrition services will vary depending on the nutrition needs of the oncology patient being treated. A registered dietitian is an integral part of the team but all clinicians, including physicians and nurses, must be active to identify patients at nutrition risk to recommend an intervention. Proactively identifying patients at nutrition risk, or with nutrition related concerns, will allow the team to determine the appropriate intervention. Standing orders for nutrition



screening can be integrated into the patient care process to allow all clinicians to participate as appropriate.

Outpatient clinics that have already incorporated nutrition into patient care have demonstrated success through helping patients alleviate distress and improve nutrition status.^{7,8} A pilot study of a Cancer Nutrition and Rehabilitation program demonstrated significant improvement of strength, appetite, constipation and shortness of breath in 53 gastroesophageal cancer patients participating in an 8-week multidisciplinary program that included nutrition support.⁷ The program used the Patient Generated Subjective Global Assessment (PG-SGA) and the Edmond Symptom Assessment Scale (ESAS), along with other questionnaires, to identify the unique needs of individual patients, such as the need to improve appetite, increase energy, or decrease symptoms of depression or anxiety.⁷ Depending on the results, the patients received intervention from various clinicians including, but not limited to, physicians, nurses, dietitians, physical and an occupational therapist, social workers, a psychologist, case managers and chaplains.⁷ The nutrition status of participants improved at the end of the pilot study as demonstrated by an improvement in PG-SGA scores.⁷ In a separate retrospective study of patients participating at a half-day symptoms control clinic for advanced cancer patients at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center revealed improvement in overall well-being with the use of a multidisciplinary team that included nutrition services.⁹ When nutrition screening and intervention is included in multidisciplinary teams, clinicians have the ability to better serve unique nutrition needs of oncology patients.

TEAM MEMBER ROLES TO IDENTIFY RISK AND INTERVENE WITH NUTRITION

The process of including nutrition into patient-centered, multidisciplinary care requires all members of the healthcare team. Nursing performs nutrition risk screening, provides education and develops relationships to encourage compliance to nutrition intake. Dietitians perform nutrition assessments to develop individual nutrition interventions when needed. The physician oversees the entire care plan to improve ability to complete treatment and documentation to support reimbursement. Holistic care also includes pharmacist, social work, physical therapy and other integrative medicine practitioners to help identify patients with nutrition difficulties including drug-medication interactions, financial burden or physical inability to eat. All healthcare providers can be knowledgeable to identify nutrition risk and empowered to provide effective nutrition intervention when appropriate.¹⁰ Nutrition intervention may range from encouraging patients to keep up their intake, education on oral nutrition supplements or assisting in starting a patient on tube feeding. Different clinicians will be involved in the care depending on the intention.

The oncology nurse is perfectly positioned and trained to provide the initial screening and provide proactive nutrition guidance. Screening for nutrition risk is an important role a nurse can play to identify patients that will benefit from immediate nutrition education, supplemental nutrition intervention or a referral to a dietitian for assessment. The Malnutrition Screening Tool (MST) is a simple, validated tool to identify patients at risk of malnutrition with cancer (See Figure).¹¹ The MST is a quick 2-3 question screen that will accurately identify patients at risk of malnutrition. If a patient is at risk, specific actions can be taken. A clinic may have a documented intervention pathway to follow if a patient is screened at risk. As just mentioned, examples include referring to a dietitian, providing a nutrition education handout or recommending an oral nutrition supplement. Nurses have the opportunity to interact with patients more frequently than most other team members. By establishing a strong therapeutic relationship with patients and their families while providing direct patient care, the nurse can effectively impact patient management strategies related to nutrition.

CONCLUSION

The multidisciplinary team is a new opportunity to address the under-recognized problem of malnutrition in the oncology population¹². With nursing providing screening and nutrition intervention at diagnosis, dietitians providing assessment and individual care plans when appropriate and physicians overseeing the entire care plan will help to treat the nutritional problems through early nutrition intervention.¹³ Currently, the lack of routine nutrition risk screening leaves more than half of at-risk patients unrecognized and one-fourth of at-risk patients without needed nutrition intervention.^{12,14} Taking steps to establish nutrition as part of the multidisciplinary team approach can help identify patients with nutrition needs and improve outcomes by providing appropriate interventions.^{7,8}

Table. Society guidelines recognizing nutrition as part of the multidisciplinary team.

Society	Recommendation to include nutrition (services) as part of Multidisciplinary Team
National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN)⁵	All patients need access to the full range of support services and specialist with the expertise in the management of oncology patients for optimal treatment and follow-up. This includes nutrition support.
National Cancer Institute (NCI)²	Screening and nutrition assessment should be interdisciplinary; the healthcare team (e.g., physicians, nurses, registered dietitians, social workers, psychologists) should all be involved in nutritional management throughout the continuum of cancer care. Virtually every cancer patient could benefit from consultation with a registered dietitian or physician to formulate a plan for nutrition and to begin meal planning.
Association of Community Cancer Centers⁴	A nutrition professional is available to work with patients and their families, especially patients identified at risk for having nutritional problems or special needs. The nutrition professional with the patient, family, and the oncology team manages issues involving the patient's nutrition and hydration status through appropriate nutrition screening, assessment, and intervention across the care continuum.

Figure. Malnutrition Screening Tool Example¹⁵

1. Have you lost weight recently without trying?	
No	0
Unsure	2
2. If yes, how much weight (kilograms) have you lost?	
1-5	1
6-10	2
11-15	3
>15	4
Unsure	2
3. Have you been eating poorly because of a decreased appetite?	
No	0
Yes	1
Total Score _____	
Score of 2 or more indicates patient may be at nutrition risk.	

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