

Female cancer survivors have 'worse health behaviors' than women with no cancer history

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A recent study conducted by researchers at Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Fla., and the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., has found that female cancer survivors receiving screening mammography have "worse health behaviors" than women receiving mammography screening and who had never had cancer.

The study was published in a recent issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

Researchers surveyed 19,948 women age 35 and older presenting for screening mammography with no prior [breast cancer](#) and compared their responses of 2,713 [cancer](#) survivors, also receiving screening mammography. The two groups were compared on smoking behaviors; alcohol use; physical activity; weight status; and vitamin use.

Study results demonstrated that:

- Cancer survivors age 30-49 had greater rates of smoking when compared with those with no cancer history.
- Cancer survivors were less likely than those with no cancer history to use alcohol monthly or greater. Younger cancer survivors were the most frequent alcohol users.
- Cancer survivors were less likely than those with no cancer

history to engage in "[strenuous exercise](#)." Regardless of cancer history, older participants were more likely than their juniors to engage in "mild exercise."

- [Body Mass Index](#) did not differ by cancer survivor status. However, cancer survivors reported less weight gain than the noncancer group over the last five years.
- Cancer survivors were more likely to use more than three vitamins.
- Cancer survivors were more likely than those with no cancer history to rate their overall health as "poor."

"These results suggest that there are opportunities for tailored behavioral health risk factor interventions for cancer survivors," said study author Sarah M. Rausch, Ph.D., a [clinical psychologist](#) and director of [Integrative Medicine](#) at Moffitt. "The differences in health behaviors between cancer survivors and those with no cancer history afford a 'teachable moment' in which a cancer survivor may be motivated to change behaviors to promote a healthier lifestyle and prevent cancer recurrence."

In the survey, cervical cancer survivors reported having many unhealthy lifestyles, consistent with other surveys examining [health behaviors](#) of cancer survivors.

"As the population of cancer survivors increases, the importance of health status and quality of life of cancer survivors is even more critical," explained Rausch. "Approximately 10.5 million people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with cancer. Because of the progress in cancer diagnosis and treatment there is a growing population of cancer survivors."

According to the study authors, of the half million cancer deaths annually in the U.S. (they cited statistics from 2006 in their study) one-

third of cancer deaths were attributed to tobacco use and one third was attributable to poor diet, physical inactivity and obesity.

"Studies, including ours, have found that cancer survivors are not as healthy as the general public," said Rausch. "As our study demonstrated, unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking and alcohol use, and a lack of physical exercise among cancer survivors presenting for screening mammography, may account for their generally less than healthy status when compared to their peers, who also presented for [screening mammography](#), but who had never had a cancer diagnosis."

The researchers concluded that the "teachable moment" drawn from their study should be exploited by health care professionals to impress upon [cancer survivors](#) the importance of practicing healthier activities to prevent cancer recurrence.

Provided by H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center & Research Institute

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