

Physiotherapist can relieve chronic cancer-related fatigue online

March 3 2017

A large proportion of patients who have undergone cancer treatment go on to suffer from chronic fatigue. A new online intervention, which uses an activity tracker and a standard smartphone, has brought significant improvement in 66% of cases, while 21% of patients report a complete recovery. Marije Wolvers of Roessingh Research and Development will receive her doctorate for her research from the University of Twente on 3 March.

Fatigue is a very common complaint among cancer patients. If someone continues to experience problems three months after the final treatment session, it is referred to as 'Chronic Cancer-Related Fatigue'. The condition is rarely self-limiting and can have a very serious impact on the quality of life. Between 20% and 40% of patients experience this problem.

Online intervention

As part of the 'Fitter after cancer' project, Marije Wolvers and a team at Roessingh Research and Development (RRD) have refined and tested an existing online intervention. Patients were equipped with an activity tracker, worn on a belt, together with a smartphone. Data from the tracker was processed by an app which automatically sent information about physical behaviour to the physiotherapist involved. A baseline measurement was taken over the course of the first week. The patient and therapist then devised a step-by-step plan, setting targets for an

increase in the patient's level of activity.

Less fatigue

A total of 62 participants used the system several days a week for nine weeks. They received feedback and tips on how to meet their individual targets through the smartphone. The patients and therapists never actually met face to face; with the exception of the initial phone call, the entire programme was run online. After six months, a significant decrease in [chronic fatigue](#) was observed in 66% of the participants, while in 21% of cases there was a complete recovery.

Marije Wolvers believes that the results show online interventions to be a useful weapon in the battle against chronic cancer-related [fatigue](#). The fact that treatment takes place in the home setting is a significant advantage, she adds, since it is here that long-term behavioural change must take place. "Travelling to a hospital for physiotherapy sessions may demand too much energy, something that these patients just don't have." Focussing on additional exercise is not always the best solution, she suggests. "For some [patients](#), it is preferable to spread activity out over the course of the day. It is therefore important to have a personalized [activity](#) plan rather than relying on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach."

Provided by University of Twente

Citation: Physiotherapist can relieve chronic cancer-related fatigue online (2017, March 3) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-physiotherapist-relieve-chronic-cancer-related-fatigue.html>

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