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Title: Physical Activity and Head and Neck Cancer: Results of a Mixed Methods Study

Body: Background: The aim of this study was to establish exercise preferences, barriers, and perceived benefits among a sample of head and neck cancer survivors in Ireland.

Methods: Mixed methods included i. a questionnaire circulated online and in hospital clinics (n=65) ii. qualitative interviews (n=19). Questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics and interview transcripts were analysed thematically.

Results: Survey participants were 60% male, treated for oral cancer (n=44, 71%) and aged between 51-75 years (n=50, 80%), had undergone surgery (n=57, 87%) and were less than 1 year post treatment (n=37, 60%). Overall, 75% (n=47) felt able to participate in exercise programmes. The greatest perceived benefits of exercise were building muscle strength (70%). The most common barriers to exercise participation were cancer related fatigue (34%), shoulder weakness/pain (32%) and decreased food intake (24%). The most popular exercise type was walking (n=54, 87%). A total of 29% of participants stated they rarely/never engaged in physical activity. Participants reported a need for individualised rehabilitation, including exercise support and guidance, to address treatment related side-effects.

Conclusion: Exercise barriers specific to head and neck cancer were common. Although participants reported ongoing side-effects of treatment, over half were willing and felt able to participate in exercise programmes.

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