

# Health News *Ohio*

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## THE **PREMIERE EDITION!**

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What All Ohio Physicians  
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## **Collaborative Health Care** *Physicians and dietitians research nutritional therapies in oncology*

*By Julie Williams*

### **Rates of survivorship**

There are now an estimated 17 million cancer survivors living in the United States and this number is expected to rise to near 30 million by 2040. This is undeniably good news; however, it is important to recognize that cancer care does not end when treatment stops.

Given the rising survivorship rate, progress is being made against the disease, but much work remains. An often-overlooked component of survivorship is nutrition. Approximately 90% of oncology patients now receive treatment in an outpatient setting. This shift away from inpatient care often leaves the patient without access to nutrition care; or the nutrition standards are vague and inconsistent. The data show there is one dietitian for every 1,200 patients- making registered

dietitians an important part of the outpatient health care team. To address these nutrition-related gaps in cancer care, physicians and dietitians are coming together at The Ohio State University College of Medicine.

Steve Clinton, MD, PhD, of the Division of Medical Oncology and Colleen Spees, PhD, MEd, RDN, LD, FAND, of School of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences at The Ohio State University College of Medicine are collaborating to address the shortage of nutrition services for their patients. Clinton says that although physicians receive a basic introduction to nutrition, a registered dietitian has the greatest amount of academic and clinical training in nutrition and food science.

“They are the true experts who have the wealth of knowledge. We should utilize dietitians for nutrition counseling the same way we use physical therapists

for physical rehabilitation. It’s important that physicians are aware of this whole group of individuals who can really bring something important to clinical care,” says Clinton.

The importance of the interdisciplinary team is recognized as each profession brings unique skills to the establishment of nutrition care. Together, they actively work with survivors to help promote changes in dietary and physical activity patterns, and other lifestyle behaviors to enable survivors to get back to normal functioning. Spees says this team approach is crucial because “in oncology outpatient care there are severe deficits in medical nutrition therapy. Often, in the outpatient setting dietitian services are not included because of the lack of reimbursement resulting in a provider shortage.”

## Why nutrition is important

The diseases of cancer and subsequent treatments often result in malnutrition. The degree of nutrition-related issues often corresponds with cancer stage, aggressiveness of disease, and treatment modalities.

“It is important to optimize nutrition when undergoing chemotherapy or radiation treatment to maintain the quality of life of the patient, reduce toxicity of the treatment and enhance the benefits of the therapy” says Clinton. He also points to evidence in clinical trials that show providing nutritional counseling optimizes oncology treatment. ScienceDirect estimated that the deaths of 10-20% of patients with cancer can be attributed to malnutrition rather than the malignancy itself.

Spees reported that “50 percent of patients are suffering from malnutrition at the time of diagnosis and during treatment that number can rise to 85 percent.” Active cancer treatment often causes nutrition-related side effects, and although they often subside after treatment ends, many survivors remain nutritional at-risk which can impact health outcomes and survival. Optimal nutrition can help patients with various side effects during cancer treatment, as well as promote recovery following curative therapy. “During treatment, medical nutrition therapy, delivered by a dietitian can help reduce interruptions in treatment, improve health outcomes and reduce hospital admissions, all contributing to overall reductions in health care costs,” said Spees.

## Setting the standard

Moving from the role of cancer patient to cancer survivor is an exciting and possibly fearful time. In general, there is not a standard aftercare plan for the new survivor to follow. Clinton and Spees hope to change that with their research program.

“If you’ve had a myocardial infarction or cardiac bypass, you’re discharged with an integrated plan,” says Clinton. “We need that paradigm

## How to find a licensed registered dietitian

- Visit [med.ohio.gov](http://med.ohio.gov)
- Under the Publications tab, choose Rosters
- Click “Active License Roster” to download a spreadsheet

for oncology. We hope to get to the point of having a standard ‘cancer survivor rehab package’ across the country like we have developed for heart patients with cardiac rehab programs.”

Their studies are testing the

development and implementation of cancer survivor rehabilitation interventions. A medically supervised program with evidence-based recommendations for good health would incorporate suggestions unique to each patient.

Clinton says it is crucial that patients adapt to a new normal and commit to a healthier lifestyle to build strength and energy, and to reduce their risk of recurrence. To help adopt positive lifestyle changes, a rehab program might include a visit with a dietitian for conversations and plans to implement eating a healthy and balanced diet, quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, minimizing alcohol consumption and staying physically active.

“Cancer survivorship is increasing dramatically by hundreds of thousands of people who have been treated. At the same time, there’s a much larger population overall,” says Clinton. “Together we have a whole new cohort who would benefit from these efforts.”



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