

The Healthy Forks Survivorship Series: Fighting cancer one fork at a time

BY JENNIFER FITZGIBBON, MS, RD, CSO, CDN



In the fall of 2014, clinical staff leaders got together at Stony Brook Cancer Center, Stony Brook, N.Y., and decided to develop a nutritional survivorship program for patients and family members. While education is important, the impact of any program is only viable if the material taught easily translates to practical solutions. Our team created the Healthy Forks Survivorship Program. Since inception, we have found the program to be non-

intimidating, easy to manage, fun to do, and—most important—one that offers each participant a sense of great accomplishment.

Our Program

The mission of Healthy Forks is to provide participants with resources to understand the necessity of providing healthy meals, at a reasonable cost, for themselves and their families, while increasing their mindfulness of the importance of stress reduction and physical activity and mental stimulation.

Cancer patients must juggle doctors' appointments, combat treatment side effects, and face financial challenges—all while trying to maintain a sense of normalcy. Because Stony Brook is a state-funded healthcare institution, many of our patients have limited resources, while others are unable to access healthcare insurance or subsidies due to their immigrant status. Approximately 40 percent of our patients require some type of financial assistance. It is vital to offer these patients and their families the resources needed to practice a healthy lifestyle.

Most payers do not cover nutritional counseling. Stony Brook offers its Healthy Forks program free of charge to patients and families in the hope that maintaining a better nutritional status will allow patients to experience fewer treatment complications, as well as reduce the incidence of obesity and malnutrition during and after treatment.

The Healthy Forks program is divided into three one-hour sessions.

Session 1

This session features an overview of nutrition basics and an antioxidant healthy smoothie demonstration by our oncology dietitian who reviews:

- Nutritional influences with diseases
- The importance of eating a plant-based diet
- The role of antioxidants
- Body weight and shape factors
- Simple measuring tools.

The oncology dietitian also reviews healthy goals and helps attendees identify ways to achieve these recommendations. Each participant receives a Healthy Forks Nutrition Survivorship booklet, which is a comprehensive resource for cancer patients and survivors. This physician-reviewed booklet includes American Institute of Cancer Research recommendations, weight issues, food controversies, product labeling, physical activity, healthy meal plans, and more.

Session 2

The second session focuses on mental relaxation, with a discussion by our physical therapist about inflammation in the body. Participants are invited to take part in 5 Minutes of Fitness, an exercise that gets everyone moving while still remaining in their chairs. All movements are non-intimidating and modified for each participant as needed. Each participant receives "crunchy" anti-inflammatory snacks and samples of green tea and water.

Participant Feedback

"Thank you both so much for the nutrition and fitness seminars. You were so informative, friendly, and professional, and I learned so much from you both!"

"I have been trying to exercise more and sit less, and have incorporated a lot more affordable organic produce into our daily meals."


"You guys are awesome! Keep up the great work! You provide such a valuable service for survivors, thank you! I feel more energetic, not overwhelmed, and uplifted as a result!"



Session 3

Led again by our oncology dietitian, this last session provides a tour of the local supermarket to help participants learn how to read product labels and purchase quality ingredients at a reasonable price. We have found that some cancer patients are vulnerable to media-hyped nutritional products and habits, and a simple visit to a local supermarket can help dispel many nutritional myths and optimize eating habits.

Our Participants

We estimate that between 10 to 20 oncology patients (18 years of age and older) and family members attend each session of the Healthy Forks program. The demographics include primarily Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American adults. Following each session, participants are asked to complete surveys, which help us to continually assess the success of our Health Forks program (see box at left). 

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Engaging the Community

Stony Brook Cancer Center is the only cancer center in Suffolk County and is well known for its community outreach activities. Our professional staff is well versed in educational outreach and highly-trained in their specialties. Our collaboration with community organizations offers Stony Brook Cancer Center the opportunity to

present its programs to a wider audience and to engage college students and community members in cancer center activities. Our outreach efforts allow program participants the opportunity to meet individually with various members of the multidisciplinary cancer care team, including a nutritionist, physical therapist, patient advocate, and social worker, all of

whom reinforce the educational materials offered. The Healthy Forks program, specifically, provides participants with practical information, healthy recipes, and instructions for easy and quick, hands-on meal preparation—knowledge to last a lifetime.