



**An Exercise Oncology Clinical Pathway: Screening and Referral for Personalized Interventions**

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## An Exercise Oncology Clinical Pathway: Screening and Referral for Personalized Interventions

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## Introduction

There are approximately 17 million cancer survivors living in the United States and by 2040 this estimate is predicted to increase to 26.1 million.<sup>1</sup> Exercise provides a myriad of health benefits to individuals during and after cancer treatment by reducing treatment-related symptoms, improving functional status and quality of life, and lowering risk of disease recurrence.<sup>2,3</sup> Despite the established benefits, an individual's level of physical activity often decreases during treatment and does not return to pre-diagnosis levels after treatment completion.<sup>4,5</sup> While exercise is regarded as safe and beneficial for individuals with cancer, promoting exercise for this population is complex. A patient-centered pathway is needed that can guide oncology and primary care professionals in efficient assessment of an individual's condition and enable personalized referrals for exercise interventions that promote physical activity. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide a framework for clinical decision making that enables personalized condition assessment, risk stratification, and referral to optimal settings for exercise promotion for cancer survivors. Implementation strategies are also offered to support the integration of this model into an oncology clinical workflow.

With guidance from their medical provider, individuals are more likely to engage in exercise and maintain levels of physical activity during cancer treatments.<sup>6</sup> However, the number of individuals with cancer who report receiving exercise-specific guidance from their health care providers is low.<sup>7</sup> Of particular concern is the lack of knowledge and training among health care professionals about exercise prescription for this complex population.<sup>8</sup>

## Condition Complexity and Exercise Prescription

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2  
3 The concurrence of cancer treatment-related side effects with pre-existing health conditions  
4  
5 often makes it difficult for individuals to engage in physical activity and exercise.<sup>9-12</sup>  
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7  
8 Furthermore, motivation,<sup>13</sup> environmental constraints, and concerns about safety during cancer  
9  
10 medical therapies are barriers that challenge exercise engagement.<sup>14 15</sup> In the case of exercise,  
11  
12 it is widely recognized that one size does not fit all. A safe and well-designed exercise  
13  
14 prescription for an individual at one point in the treatment continuum may not be safe or  
15  
16 tenable further into treatment. Cancer care is dynamic and warrants personalized treatment  
17  
18 pathways that individualize interventions, particularly regarding exercise, as the individual's  
19  
20 medical status and personal needs change.<sup>16-18</sup>  
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25 Characterizing the individual's prior level of function, exercise habits and lifestyle  
26  
27 behaviors, preexisting comorbid conditions, and environment at the point of diagnosis provides  
28  
29 important context to inform personalized exercise recommendations. A pragmatic approach to  
30  
31 promote exercise is to then repeatedly screen for clinically meaningful changes in these  
32  
33 baseline measures and refer for exercise prescription when indicated. Proactively prescribing  
34  
35 exercise throughout cancer treatment may prevent the onset of some symptoms and mitigate  
36  
37 the progressive severity of treatment-related functional impairments.<sup>19,20</sup>  
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42 Numerous care models promote proactive assessment and referral for exercise and  
43  
44 rehabilitation interventions for individuals with cancer. These models address referral based on  
45  
46 presence of physical and functional impairment,<sup>21-23</sup> age-related senescence,<sup>24</sup> adverse side  
47  
48 effects of cancer treatments,<sup>25,26</sup> and many propose skilled interventions based on level of risk  
49  
50 for treatment-related functional decline<sup>27-30</sup> or impairment burden.<sup>18,31</sup> Our core author team  
51  
52 (NS/JB/TM/AS) conducted an evidence review of these models and identified common  
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3 components that promoted prospective assessment for rehabilitative and exercise referrals in  
4  
5 oncology specifically identifying evidence for *risk stratification, screening and assessment,*  
6  
7 *triage concepts and pathways, and implementation strategies.* These findings were reviewed  
8  
9 with the entire author team over the course of two teleconference discussions. The decision  
10  
11 was made by consensus to work in teams to synthesize the evidence to support an exercise  
12  
13 clinical pathway focusing on (i) screening for risk stratification (JB/KBE/JM/JL), (ii) referral  
14  
15 pathways (NS/CA/JS/DZ), and (iii) implementation (AS/KS/LN/AC). These three areas were  
16  
17 prioritized as the most impactful to guiding oncology or primary care professionals in  
18  
19 promoting exercise referral. The concept of individual assessment for exercise interventions  
20  
21 (TM/AC/GC/KC) informed the final manuscript but was decided to be beyond the scope of this  
22  
23 manuscript and will be addressed in future work. Based on this review, we propose five  
24  
25 domains to inform a personalized exercise clinical pathway.  
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### 32 **Five Domains to Guide Decision Making**

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34  
35 The five domains provide perspective on the complexity of an individual's condition,  
36  
37 characterize risk for exercise-related complications, and guide clinical decision making for  
38  
39 individualized recommendations. The domains include *cardiometabolic status, oncologic*  
40  
41 *factors, aging considerations, behavioral characteristics, and environmental elements.* The  
42  
43 confluence of presenting symptoms within and across domains influences the exercise  
44  
45 prescription. **Figure 1** identifies the domains and common symptoms and impairments that  
46  
47 impact exercise prescription.  
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#### 51 *Cardiometabolic Status*

1  
2  
3 Cardiometabolic conditions are common pre-existing conditions in individuals with cancer that  
4  
5 influence exercise tolerance and safety.<sup>32-34</sup> Pre-existing conditions may be exacerbated by  
6  
7 cancer medical treatments and further suppress an individual's ability to be physically active.  
8  
9 Furthermore, cancer treatments may incite new cardiovascular risk factors and cardiovascular  
10  
11 events in previously healthy individuals.<sup>35</sup> In general, cardiovascular events, including stroke  
12  
13 and myocardial infarction, are common causes of premature morbidity and mortality in cancer  
14  
15 survivors.<sup>36-38</sup> Risk assessment in this domain should consider the presence of cardiometabolic  
16  
17 conditions, pre-existing and emerging, as well as the risk for cancer treatment-related  
18  
19 cardiotoxicity. These conditions present barriers to exercise and introduce safety considerations  
20  
21 when developing an exercise prescription. Risk assessment in this domain can determine if  
22  
23 supervised exercise and clinical monitoring is indicated.<sup>39</sup>  
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### 30 *Oncologic Factors*

31  
32 Cancer treatments impact multiple body systems and cause short and long-term sequelae. The  
33  
34 nature and severity of side effects are quite varied across the cancer care continuum and differ  
35  
36 substantially between individuals. Symptoms such as fatigue, restricted joint mobility,  
37  
38 lymphedema, peripheral neuropathies, musculoskeletal arthralgias, sarcopenia, bone  
39  
40 degradation and osseous fragility, incontinence, and many others are common<sup>40,41</sup> and often  
41  
42 cause physical impairments that challenge an individual's tolerance to physical activity.<sup>42</sup> While  
43  
44 this symptom burden is anticipated during antineoplastic therapies, late effects such as pain,  
45  
46 chronic fatigue, gait instability, and bone degradation also introduce challenges to physical  
47  
48 activity participation and adherence beyond the completion of treatment.<sup>43</sup>  
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3 Risk assessment in this domain should consider the severity of treatment side effects,  
4 how they progress or regress during treatment, and should monitor for an accumulated burden  
5 of side effects over the course of treatment. This warrants ongoing, repeated assessment at  
6 medically important time points through the cancer continuum to inform adaptations to  
7 exercise interventions.  
8  
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### 14 *Age and Comorbidity*

15  
16  
17 Older adults with cancer are more likely to have functional limitations compared to cancer-free  
18 controls<sup>10</sup> and many of these limitations become more severe as a result of cancer  
19 treatment.<sup>11,12</sup> Functional limitations precipitate additional barriers to exercise and  
20 participation in physical activity. The field of geriatric oncology recommends special  
21 consideration for older individuals<sup>44</sup> regarding accelerated muscle loss, cognitive deficits,  
22 decreased aerobic capacity, and other geriatric syndromes such as frailty.<sup>45,46</sup> Characterizing  
23 risk in this domain guides the selection of optimal interventions that enhance function and  
24 improve participation in physical activity. The exercise prescription needs to be tailored and  
25 gradually progressed in a supervised manner to maximize efficacy, safety, and tolerability.  
26  
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29

### 30 *Behavioral Characteristics*

31  
32 The most commonly cited reasons for not engaging in physical activity in the general population  
33 include lack of time, energy, and motivation.<sup>13</sup> Individuals living with and beyond cancer  
34 experience even greater behavioral barriers to engaging in physical activity. Low energy, time  
35 stress from multiple appointments, and the stress of dealing with a potentially fatal condition  
36 exacerbate barriers to physical activity participation.<sup>47,48</sup> Moreover, psychosocial factors such as  
37 motivational readiness, self-efficacy, and social support, contribute to whether an individual  
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3 engages in physical activity.<sup>49</sup> Assessment in this domain should evaluate the individual's  
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6 readiness to receive information about physical activity, confidence in their ability to exercise,  
7  
8 perceived barriers, and preferences for exercise types. Some individuals may possess high self-  
9  
10 efficacy, however their confidence is diminished by fears that exercise will harm them or  
11  
12 worsen side effects. Conversely, some individuals have little or no experience with exercise and  
13  
14 lack sufficient self-efficacy to independently adopt and sustain exercise habits. Assessment in  
15  
16 this domain aligns individual preferences with evidence based exercise interventions.<sup>50</sup>  
17  
18

### 19 20 *Environmental Elements*

21  
22 The environment in which individuals live influences their ability to adopt and sustain a  
23  
24 physically active lifestyle. Environmental issues include the built environment in which one lives  
25  
26 as well as their work environment, socioeconomic status, financial status, family support,  
27  
28 health care insurance, access to care, and other social determinants that impact lifestyle and  
29  
30 behavior.<sup>51,52</sup> If an individual does not live in an accessible or safe community, is employed in  
31  
32 multiple jobs working many hours, or has limited access to health and wellness facilities, they  
33  
34 are at high risk for physical inactivity.<sup>53</sup> Further complicating the environmental domain is the  
35  
36 issue of access to and payment for medical care. Cancer treatment often incites financial  
37  
38 toxicity<sup>54</sup> which may limit the ability to afford copayments for exercise interventions or to pay  
39  
40 for gym or recreational facility memberships.<sup>55</sup> Risk assessment of environmental elements is  
41  
42 important for promoting physical activity because the environment an individual lives and  
43  
44 works in will influence their ability and willingness to engage in exercise. Assessment in this  
45  
46 domain encourages exercise referrals according to individual needs and preferences that best  
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48 fit the environmental circumstances.  
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## Clinical Screening

The five domains offer a framework to simply and efficiently assess elements most relevant to identify decreasing physical activity and inform a clinical pathway for exercise referral.

Oncology clinicians are in the ideal position to conduct repeated screenings with patients through the continuum of cancer care. Primary care and other advanced practice providers also play a critical role in recognizing changes across these domains that should prompt referral.

Many individuals will have a constellation of factors that increase risk, and healthcare providers should consider the aggregate burden that exists at the confluence of these domains to inform their clinical decision.

The algorithm in **Figure 2a** provides simple screening questions across the five domains that open the conversation about exercise advice and enable referral. The algorithm accomplishes two important aspects of patient activation. First, it engages the individual in meaningful dialogue about the importance of exercise. All individuals should be counseled on the recommended physical activity guidelines and encouraged to maintain levels of activity during cancer treatment.<sup>56</sup> When an oncology provider encourages exercise, patients are more likely to pursue the intervention.<sup>6,57</sup> Second, it enables a quick screen of the five domains and a clinical decision about the appropriate exercise pathway most aligned with the individual's needs.<sup>57</sup> The goal of the algorithm is to enable a provider to quickly delineate between those who will benefit from an exercise prescription compared to those who will benefit from other services. More specific questions that characterize factors impacting the individual's ability to and willingness to exercise would be introduced in a detailed assessment by the exercise or rehabilitation professional.

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3 The endpoints of the algorithm are intended to reflect the spectrum of complexity of  
4 the individual's condition and the anticipated level of supervision and guidance that may be  
5 needed for successful exercise prescription with green representing lower complexity and  
6 risk/lower need for support and red representing higher complexity and risk/greater need for  
7 support. When treatment-related symptoms and impairments become persistent or severe  
8 they present barriers to exercise and may be an early sign of emerging functional morbidity.<sup>40,47</sup>  
9  
10 Screening for symptoms or impairments and assessing their severity provides insight on the  
11 level of intervention that is safe and effective to overcome barriers and promote improvements  
12 in physical activity. In situations of low complexity (green/yellow spectrum), independent  
13 exercise or supervised programs led by cancer exercise trainers are effective to increase  
14 exercise engagement.<sup>49</sup> Moderate to high complexity situations (orange/red spectrum) pose  
15 barriers to exercise and warrant referral to an exercise or rehabilitation professional.<sup>23,58</sup>  
16  
17

18 The presence and severity of cancer treatment-related symptoms are routinely  
19 measured throughout disease treatment. Guidelines from the National Comprehensive Cancer  
20 Network, the American Society for Clinical Oncology, and others identify critical thresholds for  
21 intervention and suggest evidence-based pathways for symptom management, often including  
22 exercise.<sup>59-61</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this manuscript to detail symptom management  
23 guidelines and referral thresholds, providers should be aware of these evidence-based  
24 recommendations and use them to objectively execute referrals along this exercise pathway.  
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27 Motivation and self-efficacy are important considerations when making exercise  
28 recommendations. Individuals may not be ready to change their behaviors nor interested in  
29 taking on exercise if they were not previously active. Acceptance of the individual's preferences  
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3 fosters better provider/patient relations that could eventually facilitate future health behaviors  
4  
5 and prompt engagement in exercise.<sup>47</sup> Safety with exercise and fear of doing harm to oneself by  
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7 ‘overdoing it’ requires discussion with a cancer exercise specialist. Exercise and rehabilitative  
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9 professionals have expertise in motivational strategies to enable individual self-activation  
10  
11 towards exercise, as well as knowledge of safety considerations with exercise prescription,  
12  
13 further supporting the need for referrals to exercise specialists. Undeniably, the suitability of  
14  
15 these pathways is negated if the patient is not able to access or afford the prescribed care.  
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17 Thus, assessing environmental and resource constraints and identifying resources that can  
18  
19 overcome them is critical.  
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### 24 **Referral Pathways**

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26  
27 The screening algorithm can prompt advice and timely referrals for the most appropriate  
28  
29 exercise intervention based on the individual’s presentation. **Figure 2b** describes the level of  
30  
31 stepped care that is likely to be suited to the individual’s needs, based on the complexity of the  
32  
33 individual’s condition, as identified through the screening algorithm, using the color scheme of  
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35 green indicating low complexity and red indicating high complexity.  
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### 39 *Exercise Recommendations*

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42 Exercise is effective across many different disease types and positively impacts multiple body  
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44 systems.<sup>20</sup> Rehabilitative exercise that targets mobility, ADL and IADL performance, return to  
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46 work, and role participation are well substantiated in the literature.<sup>62</sup> It is beyond the scope of  
47  
48 this paper to outline specific exercise interventions. The recently revised ACSM exercise  
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50 guidelines for cancer survivors provide evidence-based recommendations for physical activity,  
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52 outline preferred condition-based exercise prescriptions, and provide guidance for exercise  
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3 implementation.<sup>56,57,63</sup> Supportive care systems that include proactive exercise and  
4  
5 rehabilitation enhance medical outcomes.<sup>64,65</sup>  
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## 8 **Implementation**

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10 Achieving implementation of this framework requires enhancements to oncology clinical  
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12 workflows, technology utilization, and professional education programs.<sup>65-68</sup>  
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### 16 *Clinical Workflows*

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18  
19 Survivorship care programs are evolving in clinical oncology care due to recent changes  
20  
21 in accreditation standards.<sup>69</sup> The survivorship care team is ideally positioned to use the  
22  
23 screening algorithm throughout cancer care and to improve access to supportive care services  
24  
25 including exercise. Implementation strategies to integrate the screening tool into oncology  
26  
27 practice include leveraging patient navigation frameworks for screening and exercise  
28  
29 referrals,<sup>70</sup> use of patient reported outcomes measures to identify symptom changes that  
30  
31 warrant referrals,<sup>71</sup> and prospective supportive care services from the point of diagnosis.<sup>23,72</sup>  
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36 Co-located services with same day appointments for on-site supportive care intervention  
37  
38 promotes earlier engagement and improves patient outcomes and satisfaction.<sup>73</sup>  
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### 41 *Technology*

42

43 Technology offers numerous opportunities for personalized exercise pathways. Electronic  
44  
45 health records (EHR) can prompt use of the exercise screening tool and provide links to  
46  
47 appropriate referrals based on findings. EHRs could be setup to prompt screening questions  
48  
49 when entering vital signs and can integrate this information as a report to simplify assessment  
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51 across the five domains.  
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3           Electronic assessment tools that use Item Response Theory (IRT)-based Computerized  
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5 Adapted Testing (CAT) are gaining evidence base and clinical traction. These self-reported  
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7 assessments are low burden and provide a precise reflection of the individual's needs.<sup>74</sup> IRT-  
8  
9 based research demonstrates the ability to predict functional decline and disablement in  
10  
11 advanced cancers, an important construct to support the prospective framework that we  
12  
13 propose here.<sup>75,76</sup> Precision exercise prescription can be driven by these tools' ability to  
14  
15 accurately characterize the individual's level of function and promote tailored exercise  
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17 recommendations.<sup>71</sup>  
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23           Telehealth and telecommunication technologies may be efficient options for delivering  
24  
25 exercise interventions remotely.<sup>77</sup> Studies in cardiac rehabilitation observe that physical  
26  
27 activity increased with telehealth cardiac exercise programs.<sup>78</sup> Mobile health (mHealth) using  
28  
29 mobile devices, such as smart phones and wireless physiologic sensors, could deliver an  
30  
31 exercise intervention any time and any place and allow remote monitoring of progress and  
32  
33 physical measures, such as heart rate, enabling direct provider to patient interaction with  
34  
35 feedback and support in near-real-time. These applications could reduce many barriers of face-  
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37 to-face interactions, such as cost, transportation, access to an exercise facility, and geographic  
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39 isolation.<sup>79</sup>  
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45           An ideal technology platform would offer individuals with cancer multiple, evidence-  
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47 based options to meet their specific exercise needs and would adhere to their preferences with  
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49 consideration for their current state of health and physical ability. A platform that provides  
50  
51 individualized recommendations will likely enhance acceptability, care delivery, and  
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53 engagement in exercise. However, technology can also negatively impact care by fragmenting  
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3 services, increasing provider workloads, and contributing to burnout. Further it may frustrate  
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5 patients if the interface is not user-friendly or if the output is not perceived as helpful. While it  
6  
7 is outside of the scope of this commentary to review this literature, it is important to consider  
8  
9 technology in the context of clinical workflows and in terms of the application's acceptability to  
10  
11 patients and providers.  
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### 14 15 *Education*

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17 The education of oncology health care professionals must evolve regarding the current  
18  
19 evidence and exercise guidelines if implementation is to succeed. Continuing education  
20  
21 programs must train oncology health care professionals to know how and when to assess, and  
22  
23 where to refer cancer survivors for exercise programs. Moreover, raising the knowledgebase of  
24  
25 health care professionals across primary care and other disciplines is of paramount importance  
26  
27 to assure that long-term needs are met.  
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33 Professional degree programs should incorporate cancer exercise evidence into their  
34  
35 curriculum. Nurses, patient navigators, and community-based providers need stronger  
36  
37 knowledge of the benefits and safety of exercise to counsel patients during and following  
38  
39 treatment. Physicians and oncology advanced practice professionals need to be comfortable  
40  
41 screening and referring appropriately. The algorithm herein identifies screening questions and  
42  
43 provides prompts towards an exercise clinical pathway. Ideally, oncology professionals will  
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45 discuss exercise with their patients, but this may not always be feasible and therefore the  
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47 referral pathway to rehabilitation or exercise professionals may be optimal from a time  
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49 management perspective.<sup>70</sup>  
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3 At present, most exercise science and rehabilitation discipline education curriculum do  
4  
5 not have ample content in oncology and exercise prescription. There are emerging models for  
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7 educational curriculum including Masters' degree programs in Cancer Care\* and oncology  
8  
9 residency training programs in physiatry and physical therapy. Recently the Clinical Oncology  
10  
11 Society of Australia (COSA) recommended that exercise become a standard of care in oncology  
12  
13 across all disease states, incorporated in cancer care from the time of diagnosis.<sup>80</sup> This has  
14  
15 accelerated educational curriculum development and integrated exercise assessment into  
16  
17 clinical workflows. ACSM's *Exercise is Medicine*<sup>TM</sup> seeks to advance the dissemination and  
18  
19 implementation of the cancer exercise guidelines through the *Moving Through Cancer*<sup>†</sup>  
20  
21 initiative. However, significant changes are needed in exercise physiology curriculum to  
22  
23 enhance knowledge and skills in cancer exercise among their graduates. Integrating curriculum  
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25 changes, providing in-depth training opportunities and elevating awareness across disciplines  
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27 are necessary steps to enhance implementation.  
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### 34 35 **Integration to Practice: A Call to Action**

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37 A new standard of practice in cancer care is warranted due to the improvement in  
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39 outcomes evident when exercise is integrated into cancer care from diagnosis through  
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41 treatment. The value proposition of prospective personalized exercise clinical pathways in  
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43 oncology is that they promote early detection of physical decline and prompt exercise  
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45 interventions that mitigate or ameliorate many cancer treatment-related symptoms, reduce  
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47 impairment and disability,<sup>81,82</sup> enhance return to work and social roles,<sup>83,84</sup> and positively  
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54 \* <https://www.francis.edu/Master-of-Cancer-Care/>

55 † [https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/support\\_page.php/moving-through-cancer/](https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/support_page.php/moving-through-cancer/)

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3 influence health endpoints such as infection rates, hospitalization rates, and chemotherapy  
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5 tolerability in some populations.<sup>85-87</sup> The proposed five domains offer a framework for efficient  
6  
7 and effective screening that enables exercise referrals best suited to an individual's existing and  
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9 evolving needs. The time is now for oncology professionals to adopt this framework and to start  
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11 building the technical tools and systems to enhance healthcare professionals' ability to engage  
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13 patients around exercise and physical activity recommendations.  
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## An Exercise Oncology Clinical Pathway: Screening and Referral for Personalized Interventions

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## Introduction

There are approximately 17 million cancer survivors living in the United States and by 2040 this estimate is predicted to increase to 26.1 million.<sup>1</sup> Exercise provides a myriad of health benefits to individuals during and after cancer treatment by reducing treatment-related symptoms, improving functional status and quality of life, and lowering risk of disease recurrence.<sup>2,3</sup> Despite the established benefits, an individual's level of physical activity often decreases during treatment and does not return to pre-diagnosis levels after treatment completion.<sup>4,5</sup> While exercise is regarded as safe and beneficial for individuals with cancer, promoting exercise for this population is complex. A patient-centered pathway is needed that can guide oncology and primary care professionals in efficient assessment of an individual's condition and enable personalized referrals for exercise interventions that promote physical activity. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide a framework for clinical decision making that enables personalized condition assessment, risk stratification, and referral to optimal settings for exercise promotion for cancer survivors. Implementation strategies are also offered to support the integration of this model into an oncology clinical workflow.

With guidance from their medical provider, individuals are more likely to engage in exercise and maintain levels of physical activity during cancer treatments.<sup>6</sup> However, the number of individuals with cancer who report receiving exercise-specific guidance from their health care providers is low.<sup>7</sup> Of particular concern is the lack of knowledge and training among health care professionals about exercise prescription for this complex population.<sup>8</sup>

## Condition Complexity and Exercise Prescription

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3 The concurrence of cancer treatment-related side effects with pre-existing health conditions  
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5 often makes it difficult for individuals to engage in physical activity and exercise.<sup>9-12</sup>  
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8 Furthermore, motivation,<sup>13</sup> environmental constraints, and concerns about safety during cancer  
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10 medical therapies are barriers that challenge exercise engagement.<sup>14 15</sup> In the case of exercise,  
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12 it is widely recognized that one size does not fit all. A safe and well-designed exercise  
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14 prescription for an individual at one point in the treatment continuum may not be safe or  
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16 tenable further into treatment. Cancer care is dynamic and warrants personalized treatment  
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18 pathways that individualize interventions, particularly regarding exercise, as the individual's  
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20 medical status and personal needs change.<sup>16-18</sup>  
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25 Characterizing the individual's prior level of function, exercise habits and lifestyle  
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27 behaviors, preexisting comorbid conditions, and environment at the point of diagnosis provides  
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29 important context to inform personalized exercise recommendations. A pragmatic approach to  
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31 promote exercise is to then repeatedly screen for clinically meaningful changes in these  
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33 baseline measures and refer for exercise prescription when indicated. Proactively prescribing  
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35 exercise throughout cancer treatment may prevent the onset of some symptoms and mitigate  
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37 the progressive severity of treatment-related functional impairments.<sup>19,20</sup>  
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42 Numerous care models promote proactive assessment and referral for exercise and  
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44 rehabilitation interventions for individuals with cancer. These models address referral based on  
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46 presence of physical and functional impairment,<sup>21-23</sup> age-related senescence,<sup>24</sup> adverse side  
47  
48 effects of cancer treatments,<sup>25,26</sup> and many propose skilled interventions based on level of risk  
49  
50 for treatment-related functional decline<sup>27-30</sup> or impairment burden.<sup>18,31</sup> **Our core author team**  
51  
52 **(NS/JB/TM/AS) conducted an evidence review of these models and identified common**  
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3 components that promoted prospective assessment for rehabilitative and exercise referrals  
4  
5 in oncology specifically identifying evidence for *risk stratification, screening and assessment,*  
6  
7 *triage concepts and pathways, and implementation strategies.* These findings were reviewed  
8  
9 with the entire author team over the course of two teleconference discussions. The decision  
10  
11 was made by consensus to work in teams to synthesize the evidence to support an exercise  
12  
13 clinical pathway focusing on (i) screening for risk stratification (JB/KBE/JM/JL), (ii) referral  
14  
15 pathways (NS/CA/JS/DZ), and (iii) implementation (AS/KS/LN/AC). These three areas were  
16  
17 prioritized as the most impactful to guiding oncology or primary care professionals in  
18  
19 promoting exercise referral. The concept of individual assessment for exercise interventions  
20  
21 (TM/AC/GC/KC) informed the final manuscript but was decided to be beyond the scope of  
22  
23 this manuscript and will be addressed in future work. Based on this review, we propose five  
24  
25 domains to inform a personalized exercise clinical pathway.  
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### 32 **Five Domains to Guide Decision Making**

33  
34 The five domains provide perspective on the complexity of an individual's condition,  
35  
36 characterize risk for exercise-related complications, and guide clinical decision making for  
37  
38 individualized recommendations. The domains include *cardiometabolic status, oncologic*  
39  
40 *factors, aging considerations, behavioral characteristics, and environmental elements.* The  
41  
42 confluence of presenting symptoms within and across domains influences the exercise  
43  
44 prescription. **Figure 1** identifies the domains and common symptoms and impairments that  
45  
46 impact exercise prescription.  
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#### 51 *Cardiometabolic Status*

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3 Cardiometabolic conditions are common pre-existing conditions in individuals with cancer that  
4 influence exercise tolerance and safety.<sup>32-34</sup> Pre-existing conditions may be exacerbated by  
5 cancer medical treatments and further suppress an individual's ability to be physically active.  
6  
7 Furthermore, cancer treatments may incite new cardiovascular risk factors and cardiovascular  
8 events in previously healthy individuals.<sup>35</sup> In general, cardiovascular events, including stroke  
9 and myocardial infarction, are common causes of premature morbidity and mortality in cancer  
10 survivors.<sup>36-38</sup> Risk assessment in this domain should consider the presence of cardiometabolic  
11 conditions, pre-existing and emerging, as well as the risk for cancer treatment-related  
12 cardiotoxicity. These conditions present barriers to exercise and introduce safety considerations  
13 when developing an exercise prescription. Risk assessment in this domain can determine if  
14 supervised exercise and clinical monitoring is indicated.<sup>39</sup>

### 30 *Oncologic Factors*

31  
32 Cancer treatments impact multiple body systems and cause short and long-term sequelae. The  
33 nature and severity of side effects are quite varied across the cancer care continuum and differ  
34 substantially between individuals. Symptoms such as fatigue, restricted joint mobility,  
35 lymphedema, peripheral neuropathies, musculoskeletal arthralgias, sarcopenia, bone  
36 degradation and osseous fragility, incontinence, and many others are common<sup>40,41</sup> and often  
37 cause physical impairments that challenge an individual's tolerance to physical activity.<sup>42</sup> While  
38 this symptom burden is anticipated during antineoplastic therapies, late effects such as pain,  
39 chronic fatigue, gait instability, and bone degradation also introduce challenges to physical  
40 activity participation and adherence beyond the completion of treatment.<sup>43</sup>

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3 Risk assessment in this domain should consider the severity of treatment side effects,  
4 how they progress or regress during treatment, and should monitor for an accumulated burden  
5 of side effects over the course of treatment. This warrants ongoing, repeated assessment at  
6 medically important time points through the cancer continuum to inform adaptations to  
7 exercise interventions.  
8  
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### 10 *Age and Comorbidity*

11 Older adults with cancer are more likely to have functional limitations compared to cancer-free  
12 controls<sup>10</sup> and many of these limitations become more severe as a result of cancer  
13 treatment.<sup>11,12</sup> Functional limitations precipitate additional barriers to exercise and  
14 participation in physical activity. The field of geriatric oncology recommends special  
15 consideration for older individuals<sup>44</sup> regarding accelerated muscle loss, cognitive deficits,  
16 decreased aerobic capacity, and other geriatric syndromes such as frailty.<sup>45,46</sup> Characterizing  
17 risk in this domain guides the selection of optimal interventions that enhance function and  
18 improve participation in physical activity. The exercise prescription needs to be tailored and  
19 gradually progressed in a supervised manner to maximize efficacy, safety, and tolerability.  
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### 40 *Behavioral Characteristics*

41 The most commonly cited reasons for not engaging in physical activity in the general population  
42 include lack of time, energy, and motivation.<sup>13</sup> Individuals living with and beyond cancer  
43 experience even greater behavioral barriers to engaging in physical activity. Low energy, time  
44 stress from multiple appointments, and the stress of dealing with a potentially fatal condition  
45 exacerbate barriers to physical activity participation.<sup>47,48</sup> Moreover, psychosocial factors such as  
46 motivational readiness, self-efficacy, and social support, contribute to whether an individual  
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3 engages in physical activity.<sup>49</sup> Assessment in this domain should evaluate the individual's  
4  
5 readiness to receive information about physical activity, confidence in their ability to exercise,  
6  
7 perceived barriers, and preferences for exercise types. Some individuals may possess high self-  
8  
9 efficacy, however their confidence is diminished by fears that exercise will harm them or  
10  
11 worsen side effects. Conversely, some individuals have little or no experience with exercise and  
12  
13 lack sufficient self-efficacy to independently adopt and sustain exercise habits. Assessment in  
14  
15 this domain aligns individual preferences with evidence based exercise interventions.<sup>50</sup>  
16  
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### 20 *Environmental Elements*

21  
22 The environment in which individuals live influences their ability to adopt and sustain a  
23  
24 physically active lifestyle. Environmental issues include the built environment in which one lives  
25  
26 as well as their work environment, socioeconomic status, financial status, family support,  
27  
28 health care insurance, access to care, and other social determinants that impact lifestyle and  
29  
30 behavior.<sup>51,52</sup> If an individual does not live in an accessible or safe community, is employed in  
31  
32 multiple jobs working many hours, or has limited access to health and wellness facilities, they  
33  
34 are at high risk for physical inactivity.<sup>53</sup> Further complicating the environmental domain is the  
35  
36 issue of access to and payment for medical care. Cancer treatment often incites financial  
37  
38 toxicity<sup>54</sup> which may limit the ability to afford copayments for exercise interventions or to pay  
39  
40 for gym or recreational facility memberships.<sup>55</sup> Risk assessment of environmental elements is  
41  
42 important for promoting physical activity because the environment an individual lives and  
43  
44 works in will influence their ability and willingness to engage in exercise. Assessment in this  
45  
46 domain encourages exercise referrals according to individual needs and preferences that best  
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48 fit the environmental circumstances.  
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## Clinical Screening

The five domains offer a framework to simply and efficiently assess elements most relevant to identify decreasing physical activity and inform a clinical pathway for exercise referral.

Oncology clinicians are in the ideal position to conduct repeated screenings with patients through the continuum of cancer care. Primary care and other advanced practice providers also play a critical role in recognizing changes across these domains that should prompt referral.

Many individuals will have a constellation of factors that increase risk, and healthcare providers should consider the aggregate burden that exists at the confluence of these domains to inform their clinical decision.

The algorithm in **Figure 2a** provides simple screening questions across the five domains that open the conversation about exercise advice and enable referral. The algorithm accomplishes two important aspects of patient activation. First, it engages the individual in meaningful dialogue about the importance of exercise. All individuals should be counseled on the recommended physical activity guidelines and encouraged to maintain levels of activity during cancer treatment.<sup>56</sup> When an oncology provider encourages exercise, patients are more likely to pursue the intervention.<sup>6,57</sup> Second, it enables a quick screen of the five domains and a clinical decision about the appropriate exercise pathway most aligned with the individual's needs.<sup>57</sup> **The goal of the algorithm is to enable a provider to quickly delineate between those who will benefit from an exercise prescription compared to those who will benefit from other services. More specific questions that characterize factors impacting the individual's ability to and willingness to exercise would be introduced in a detailed assessment by the exercise or rehabilitation professional.**

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3           **The endpoints of the algorithm are intended to reflect the spectrum of complexity of**  
4  
5 **the individual's condition and the anticipated level of supervision and guidance that may be**  
6  
7 **needed for successful exercise prescription with green representing lower complexity and**  
8  
9 **risk/lower need for support and red representing higher complexity and risk/greater need for**  
10  
11 **support.** When treatment-related symptoms and impairments become persistent or severe  
12  
13 they present barriers to exercise and may be an early sign of emerging functional morbidity.<sup>40,47</sup>  
14  
15 Screening for symptoms or impairments and assessing their severity provides insight on the  
16  
17 level of intervention that is safe and effective to overcome barriers and promote improvements  
18  
19 in physical activity. In situations of low complexity (**green/yellow spectrum**), independent  
20  
21 exercise or supervised programs led by cancer exercise trainers are effective to increase  
22  
23 exercise engagement.<sup>49</sup> Moderate to high complexity situations (**orange/red spectrum**) pose  
24  
25 barriers to exercise and warrant referral to an exercise or rehabilitation professional.<sup>23,58</sup>  
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32           The presence and severity of cancer treatment-related symptoms are routinely  
33  
34 measured throughout disease treatment. Guidelines from the National Comprehensive Cancer  
35  
36 Network, the American Society for Clinical Oncology, and others identify critical thresholds for  
37  
38 intervention and suggest evidence-based pathways for symptom management, often including  
39  
40 exercise.<sup>59-61</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this manuscript to detail symptom management  
41  
42 guidelines and referral thresholds, providers should be aware of these evidence-based  
43  
44 recommendations and use them to objectively execute referrals along this exercise pathway.  
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49           Motivation and self-efficacy are important considerations when making exercise  
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51 recommendations. Individuals may not be ready to change their behaviors nor interested in  
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53 taking on exercise if they were not previously active. Acceptance of the individual's preferences  
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3 fosters better provider/patient relations that could eventually facilitate future health behaviors  
4  
5 and prompt engagement in exercise.<sup>47</sup> Safety with exercise and fear of doing harm to oneself by  
6  
7 ‘overdoing it’ requires discussion with a cancer exercise specialist. Exercise and rehabilitative  
8  
9 professionals have expertise in motivational strategies to enable individual self-activation  
10  
11 towards exercise, as well as knowledge of safety considerations with exercise prescription,  
12  
13 further supporting the need for referrals to exercise specialists. Undeniably, the suitability of  
14  
15 these pathways is negated if the patient is not able to access or afford the prescribed care.  
16  
17 Thus, assessing environmental and resource constraints and identifying resources that can  
18  
19 overcome them is critical.  
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## 24 **Referral Pathways**

25  
26 The screening algorithm can prompt advice and timely referrals for the most appropriate  
27  
28 exercise intervention based on the individual’s presentation. **Figure 2b** describes the level of  
29  
30 stepped care that is likely to be suited to the individual’s needs, based on the complexity of the  
31  
32 individual’s condition, as identified **through the screening algorithm, using the color scheme of**  
33  
34 **green indicating low complexity and red indicating high complexity.**  
35  
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## 39 *Exercise Recommendations*

40  
41 Exercise is effective across many different disease types and positively impacts multiple body  
42  
43 systems.<sup>20</sup> Rehabilitative exercise that targets mobility, ADL and IADL performance, return to  
44  
45 work, and role participation are well substantiated in the literature.<sup>62</sup> It is beyond the scope of  
46  
47 this paper to outline specific exercise interventions. The recently revised ACSM exercise  
48  
49 guidelines for cancer survivors provide evidence-based recommendations for physical activity,  
50  
51 outline preferred condition-based exercise prescriptions, and provide guidance for exercise  
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3 implementation.<sup>56,57,63</sup> Supportive care systems that include proactive exercise and  
4  
5 rehabilitation enhance medical outcomes.<sup>64,65</sup>  
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7

## 8 **Implementation**

9

10 Achieving implementation of this framework requires enhancements to oncology clinical  
11  
12 workflows, technology utilization, and professional education programs.<sup>65-68</sup>  
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### 16 *Clinical Workflows*

17

18  
19 Survivorship care programs are evolving in clinical oncology care due to recent changes  
20  
21 in accreditation standards.<sup>69</sup> The survivorship care team is ideally positioned to use the  
22  
23 screening algorithm throughout cancer care and to improve access to supportive care services  
24  
25 including exercise. Implementation strategies to integrate the screening tool into oncology  
26  
27 practice include leveraging patient navigation frameworks for screening and exercise  
28  
29 referrals,<sup>70</sup> use of patient reported outcomes measures to identify symptom changes that  
30  
31 warrant referrals,<sup>71</sup> and prospective supportive care services from the point of diagnosis.<sup>23,72</sup>  
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33  
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36 Co-located services with same day appointments for on-site supportive care intervention  
37  
38 promotes earlier engagement and improves patient outcomes and satisfaction.<sup>73</sup>  
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### 41 *Technology*

42

43 Technology offers numerous opportunities for personalized exercise pathways. Electronic  
44  
45 health records (EHR) can prompt use of the exercise screening tool and provide links to  
46  
47 appropriate referrals based on findings. EHRs could be setup to prompt screening questions  
48  
49 when entering vital signs and can integrate this information as a report to simplify assessment  
50  
51 across the five domains.  
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3           Electronic assessment tools that use Item Response Theory (IRT)-based Computerized  
4  
5 Adapted Testing (CAT) are gaining evidence base and clinical traction. These self-reported  
6  
7 assessments are low burden and provide a precise reflection of the individual's needs.<sup>74</sup> IRT-  
8  
9 based research demonstrates the ability to predict functional decline and disablement in  
10  
11 advanced cancers, an important construct to support the prospective framework that we  
12  
13 propose here.<sup>75,76</sup> Precision exercise prescription can be driven by these tools' ability to  
14  
15 accurately characterize the individual's level of function and promote tailored exercise  
16  
17 recommendations.<sup>71</sup>

18  
19           Telehealth and telecommunication technologies may be efficient options for delivering  
20  
21 exercise interventions remotely.<sup>77</sup> Studies in cardiac rehabilitation observe that physical  
22  
23 activity increased with telehealth cardiac exercise programs.<sup>78</sup> Mobile health (mHealth) using  
24  
25 mobile devices, such as smart phones and wireless physiologic sensors, could deliver an  
26  
27 exercise intervention any time and any place and allow remote monitoring of progress and  
28  
29 physical measures, such as heart rate, enabling direct provider to patient interaction with  
30  
31 feedback and support in near-real-time. These applications could reduce many barriers of face-  
32  
33 to-face interactions, such as cost, transportation, access to an exercise facility, and geographic  
34  
35 isolation.<sup>79</sup>

36  
37           An ideal technology platform would offer individuals with cancer multiple, evidence-  
38  
39 based options to meet their specific exercise needs and would adhere to their preferences with  
40  
41 consideration for their current state of health and physical ability. A platform that provides  
42  
43 individualized recommendations will likely enhance acceptability, care delivery, and  
44  
45 engagement in exercise. **However, technology can also negatively impact care by fragmenting**

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2  
3 **services, increasing provider workloads, and contributing to burnout. Further it may frustrate**  
4  
5 **patients if the interface is not user-friendly or if the output is not perceived as helpful. While**  
6  
7 **it is outside of the scope of this commentary to review this literature, it is important to**  
8  
9 **consider technology in the context of clinical workflows and in terms of the application’s**  
10  
11 **acceptability to patients and providers.**  
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### 14 *Education*

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17  
18 The education of oncology health care professionals must evolve regarding the current  
19  
20 evidence and exercise guidelines if implementation is to succeed. Continuing education  
21  
22 programs must train oncology health care professionals to know how and when to assess, and  
23  
24 where to refer cancer survivors for exercise programs. Moreover, raising the knowledgebase of  
25  
26 health care professionals across primary care and other disciplines is of paramount importance  
27  
28 to assure that long-term needs are met.  
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32  
33 Professional degree programs should incorporate cancer exercise evidence into their  
34  
35 curriculum. Nurses, patient navigators, and community-based providers need stronger  
36  
37 knowledge of the benefits and safety of exercise to counsel patients during and following  
38  
39 treatment. Physicians and oncology advanced practice professionals need to be comfortable  
40  
41 screening and referring appropriately. The algorithm herein identifies screening questions and  
42  
43 provides prompts towards an exercise clinical pathway. Ideally, oncology professionals will  
44  
45 discuss exercise with their patients, but this may not always be feasible and therefore the  
46  
47 referral pathway to rehabilitation or exercise professionals may be optimal from a time  
48  
49 management perspective.<sup>70</sup>  
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3 At present, most exercise science and rehabilitation discipline education curriculum do  
4  
5 not have ample content in oncology and exercise prescription. There are emerging models for  
6  
7 educational curriculum including Masters' degree programs in Cancer Care\* and oncology  
8  
9 residency training programs in physiatry and physical therapy. Recently the Clinical Oncology  
10  
11 Society of Australia (COSA) recommended that exercise become a standard of care in oncology  
12  
13 across all disease states, incorporated in cancer care from the time of diagnosis.<sup>80</sup> This has  
14  
15 accelerated educational curriculum development and integrated exercise assessment into  
16  
17 clinical workflows. ACSM's *Exercise is Medicine*<sup>TM</sup> seeks to advance the dissemination and  
18  
19 implementation of the cancer exercise guidelines through the *Moving Through Cancer*<sup>†</sup>  
20  
21 initiative. However, significant changes are needed in exercise physiology curriculum to  
22  
23 enhance knowledge and skills in cancer exercise among their graduates. Integrating curriculum  
24  
25 changes, providing in-depth training opportunities and elevating awareness across disciplines  
26  
27 are necessary steps to enhance implementation.  
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### 34 35 **Integration to Practice: A Call to Action**

36  
37 A new standard of practice in cancer care is warranted due to the improvement in  
38  
39 outcomes evident when exercise is integrated into cancer care from diagnosis through  
40  
41 treatment. The value proposition of prospective personalized exercise clinical pathways in  
42  
43 oncology is that they promote early detection of physical decline and prompt exercise  
44  
45 interventions that mitigate or ameliorate many cancer treatment-related symptoms, reduce  
46  
47 impairment and disability,<sup>81,82</sup> enhance return to work and social roles,<sup>83,84</sup> and positively  
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54 \* <https://www.francis.edu/Master-of-Cancer-Care/>

55 † [https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/support\\_page.php/moving-through-cancer/](https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/support_page.php/moving-through-cancer/)

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2  
3 influence health endpoints such as infection rates, hospitalization rates, and chemotherapy  
4  
5 tolerability in some populations.<sup>85-87</sup> The proposed five domains offer a framework for efficient  
6  
7 and effective screening that enables exercise referrals best suited to an individual's existing and  
8  
9 evolving needs. The time is now for oncology professionals to adopt this framework and to start  
10  
11 building the technical tools and systems to enhance healthcare professionals' ability to engage  
12  
13 patients around exercise and physical activity recommendations.  
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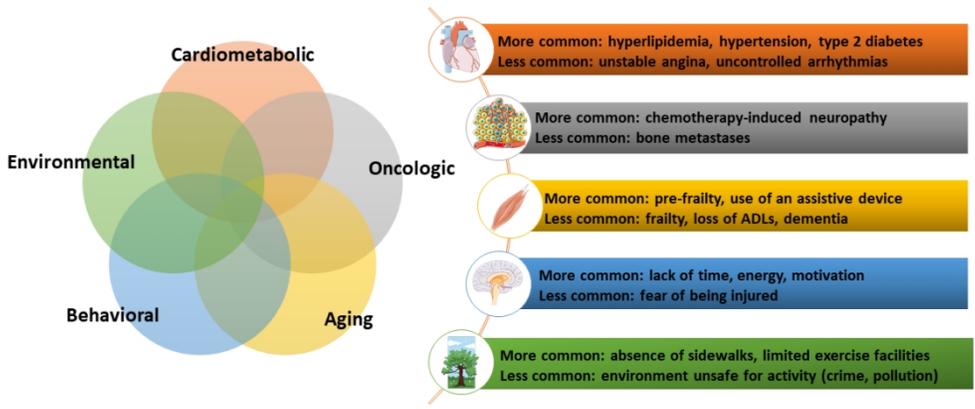


Figure 1. Five Domains that Inform Assessment for Exercise Referrals and Prescription

338x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

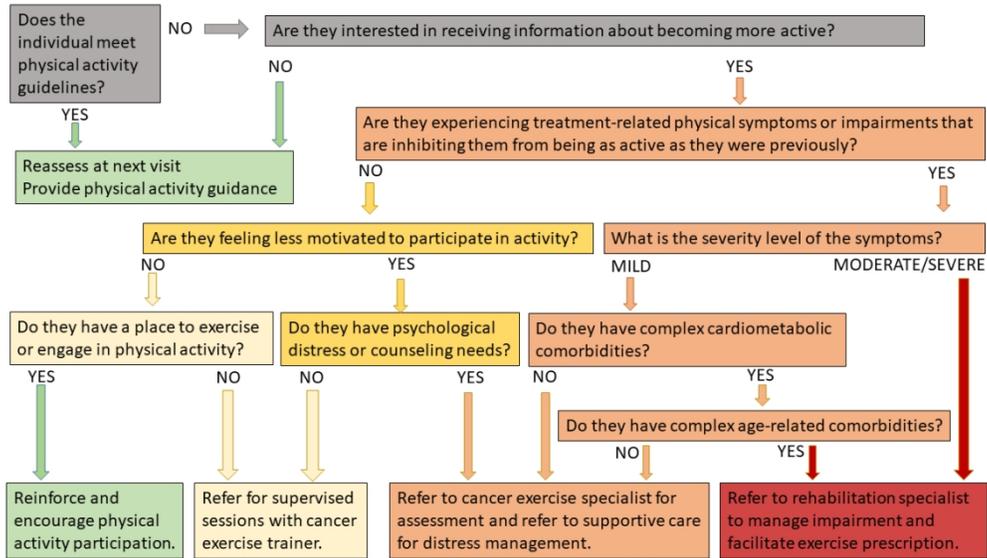


Figure 2a. Algorithm for an exercise referral clinical pathway\*

\*The pathway is intended to stratify individuals to higher (red) or lower (green) condition complexity which provides insight to the level of supervision and guidance they may need to successfully engage in exercise and informs referrals to setting outlined in 2b.

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	<b>What</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>Where</b>
<b>High complexity</b>	Physician clearance Medical work up Supervised exercise program Impairment management Caregiver guidance	Physiatrist Rehabilitation providers (PT/OT/RN)	Acute rehabilitation setting Multidisciplinary outpatient rehabilitation setting
<b>Moderate Complexity</b>	Physician clearance Supervised exercise program Impairment management Caregiver integration	Rehabilitation providers Cancer exercise physiologist	Outpatient rehabilitation setting Medically-oriented gym or fitness center
<b>Low Complexity</b>	Group or supervised exercise program Lifestyle coaching Impairment monitoring	Exercise physiologist Cancer exercise trainer	Gym or fitness center Wellness center
<b>Independent</b>	Group exercise program Home-based independent Community-based facility	Self-guided Coach Technology assisted	Any setting of individual preference

Figure 2b. Suggested Exercise Settings and Supervision Based on Individual Condition Complexity and Risk for Decline.

338x190mm (72 x 72 DPI)