

Revisión

Multimodal oncological prehabilitation

Prehabilitación oncológica multimodal

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Abstract

Physical function and quality of life are severely impacted by cancer and oncological treatments. In light of these findings over the last two decades, the focus of cancer rehabilitation research has shifted to preventive interventions. These interventions, known as prehabilitation, aim to improve patients' physical, mental, and nutritional status before oncological treatment. The term prehabilitation was first defined in 2013 by Silver *et al.* as "a process on the cancer continuum of care that occurs between the time of cancer diagnosis and the beginning of acute treatment and includes physical and psychological assessments that establish a baseline functional level, identify impairments, and provide interventions that promote physical and psychological health to reduce the incidence and/or severity of future impairments. Since then, the impact of prehabilitation has been evaluated in multiple cancer types with beneficial results. This review aims to describe the benefits of rehabilitation in the cancer continuum and the effects on the different disease groups.

Keywords. Prehabilitation, rehabilitation, nutritional sciences, quality of life, disease prevention, cancer.

Resumen

La función física y la calidad de vida son aspectos que se ven gravemente afectados por el cáncer y los tratamientos oncológicos. Según los hallazgos de la presente revisión, en las últimas dos décadas la investigación en rehabilitación oncológica se ha centrado en intervenciones preventivas, las cuales son conocidas como prehabilitación y tienen como objetivo mejorar el estado físico, mental y nutricional de los pacientes antes del tratamiento oncológico.

El término prehabilitación fue definido por primera vez en 2013 por Silver *et al.* como "un proceso en el continuo de atención del cáncer que se produce entre el momento del diagnóstico de cáncer y el comienzo del tratamiento agudo, e incluye evaluaciones físicas y psicológicas que establecen un nivel funcional de referencia, identifican las deficiencias y proporcionan intervenciones que promueven la salud física y psicológica para reducir la incidencia o la gravedad de las deficiencias futuras". Desde entonces, se ha evaluado el impacto de la prehabilitación en múltiples tipos de cáncer con resultados beneficiosos.

La presente revisión tiene como objetivo describir los beneficios de la prehabilitación en el continuo del cáncer y los efectos sobre los diferentes grupos de enfermedades.

Palabras clave. Prehabilitación, rehabilitación, ciencias de la nutrición, calidad de vida, prevención de enfermedades, cáncer.



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Introduction

The concept of prehabilitation

Exercise has been identified as having an essential role in improving or maintaining the function of oncological patients^{1,2}. Physical exercise has been integrated into enhanced recovery after surgery (ERAS) pathways. The preoperative component

of the ERAS protocols focuses on optimizing the patient prior to surgical interventions, and exercise is one of the pillars of this approach (Figure-1). Nonetheless, a multimodal approach has been found to be comprehensive and effective in improving oncologic patients' function, facilitating recovery, and becoming the standard of care. In addition to exercise, improving nutritional intake, psychological well-being, and tobacco cessation are the other pillars of multimodal prehabilitation (Figure-2).



Figure 1. Timeline of rehabilitation interventions.
Source: own elaboration.

Exercise	Nutrition	Psychology	Tabacco cessation
Aerobic-high/medium intensity Resistance and strengthening Stretching Inspiratory muscle training	Oral nutritional Assessment and dietary counseling Parenteral Nutrition	Education Surgery Coping strategies Psychotherapy Enhanced support	Counseling Nicotine replacement Medication

Figure 2. Components of a multimodal prehabilitation program.
Source: own elaboration.

Malnutrition is a prevalent finding among cancer patients. Although the prevalence can vary depending on the cancer type, malnutrition is identified in 15-40% of the patients with a recent cancer diagnosis. These numbers can increase to 40-80% during cancer treatment³. Zang *et al.*⁴ performed a meta-analysis to investigate the relationship between malnutrition and adverse outcomes in cancer patients. The authors identified that 12-80% of cancer patients are at risk of malnutrition, which is associated with increased postoperative complications, with an odds ratio of 2.27 (95% CI 1.81-2.84). Gastrointestinal, head and neck, lung, and hematological cancers have been found among the most common cancer types associated with malnutrition⁵. Most of these cancers require surgical intervention as part of the treatment. Improving perioperative nutrition is associated with

decreased postoperative complications and length of stay, becoming a vital element of a prehabilitation program².

Mood disorders, particularly depression, are prevalent among cancer patients, with prevalence rates ranging from 5% to 60%. These disorders have a detrimental impact on recovery and prognosis^{2,6,7}. Prehabilitation interventions often incorporate techniques to alleviate anxiety, such as breathing exercises, counseling, and coping strategies. Despite the variability in interventions and outcomes, there is strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of these approaches in improving patients' moods⁸. Authors like Grassen *et al.* also describe the positive effect of preoperative stress management training on patients' mood disturbance and depressive symptoms. However, research has not identified

psychological prehabilitation effectiveness as a unimodal approach⁸. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that supports its inclusion as part of multimodal prehabilitation programs⁸⁻¹⁰.

Traditionally, smoking tobacco cessation have been considered part of the multimodal approach. Active smoking has been associated with surgical complications, increasing the risk to up to 22%¹¹. A meta-analysis performed to determine the benefits of smoking cessation demonstrated a relative risk reduction of up to 41%, with increases of 19% for each week, especially for wound healing and pulmonary complications. In addition to smoking cessation, other interventions included in multimodal prehabilitation, such as Inspiratory muscle training with increased resistance and cognitive therapy, both showed promising results².

Interventions and outcomes measures

Exercise

Exercise interventions in prehabilitation are often heterogenous¹². From supervised to independent, exercise interventions can include aerobic and/or resistance exercise or a mix of modalities. Similarly, depending on the protocol, the intensity and frequency can vary. Although some studies highlight the benefits of high-intensity interval training, other protocols based the aerobic activity recommendations on the exercise guidelines for cancer survivors: moderate-intensity aerobic activity combined with resistance exercise three times a week¹³⁻¹⁶. The duration of the program also has been variable from protocol to protocol. However, most studies agree that a minimum of 6-8 weeks is needed to see a significant improvement.

A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted in 2021 evaluated the feasibility of exercise-based prehabilitation in 1371 cancer patients. The study revealed a completion rate of 89.7%¹⁷. However, depending on the nature of the oncological process, the patient's participation and completion of program rates may vary. Colorectal cancer, one of the most studied cancer sites in prehabilitation research, reports the highest level of acceptability, ranging between 90-100%¹⁷. On the other hand, a randomized

control clinical trial on esophageal cancer patients reports lower compliance (68%). Nonetheless, this study demonstrated that prehabilitation in this cancer population is not only safe and feasible but also improves physical function, even in those patients receiving neoadjuvant chemotherapy¹⁸.

Prehabilitation in lung cancer patients has been extensively studied. Cardiovascular reserve, assessed as part of preoperative evaluation, helps determine fitness levels and the need for prehabilitation¹⁹. Prehabilitation programs should be tailored to individual patients, considering factors like surgical timing, exercise history, and anticipated rehabilitation needs. While moderate-intensity exercise is commonly recommended, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) has shown promise in lung cancer patients. HIIT programs, typically lasting 7 to 4 weeks, incorporate aerobic activity, strengthening, and respiratory exercises. Patients exercise 2-4 times weekly at moderate to vigorous intensity for 10-90 minutes. HIIT may be particularly beneficial for patients with shorter preoperative time²⁰. Additionally, studies suggest that respiratory muscle strengthening can reduce postoperative complications. However, the heterogeneity of existing research makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions.

Aerobic exercise has traditionally been the cornerstone of physical activity prehabilitation interventions for cancer patients. However, recent research has expanded the scope of aerobic exercise interventions to address common cancer-related impairments. This focus has yielded promising results, demonstrating decreased symptoms and potentially improved preparation for oncological treatments, including surgery²¹. In 2019, the American College of Sports Medicine updated its guidelines for exercise in oncological patients. These guidelines recommend a comprehensive approach that includes both aerobic and resistance exercises based on a robust body of evidence. Strong evidence supports the benefits of aerobic exercise in addressing cancer-related fatigue, health-related quality of life, physical function, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, there is moderate evidence for the positive impact of aerobic exercise on sleep. In terms of resistance exercises, there is strong support for their effectiveness in managing lymphedema, cancer-related fatigue, health-related quality of life, and physical function¹³.

Research studies utilized previously validated measurements of physical function. The Six-Minute-Walk-distance (6MWD) test is the most common measure used to determine the effects of prehabilitation. This test evaluates cardiorespiratory fitness in a safe and well-tolerated manner. It is a validated, standardized method in which results are adjusted based on an equation that includes gender, weight, and height. Based on this equation, it is possible to predict the percentage predicted value for an adult individual²². There is more than one equation that can be used as a reference, and even though some of them include the age of the person, some authors have found that age has a minimal effect²³. Several meta-analyses evaluated the effect of prehabilitation on the physical function of patients assessed with the 6MWD test. In all the metanalysis, which included different oncological pathologies, patients who underwent multimodal prehabilitation had improvements in the 6MWD test^{17,24,26}.

Peak oxygen consumption (VO_2 peak) is more accurate than the 6MWD test to measure cardiopulmonary fitness²⁷. However, it is a more expensive and less available test. VO_2 peak has been particularly tested in patients with lung cancer undergoing prehabilitation with HIIT, with evidence of improvement²⁸. Regarding the relationship between VO_2 and survival in lung cancer patients, Lindenmann *et al.*²⁹ conducted a retrospective analysis that included 342 patients. In this study, the author found that patients with lower pre-operative VO_2 peaks were associated with lower overall and non-tumor-related survival. This study highlights the importance of improving VO_2 peak prior to surgical interventions, especially in lung cancer patients. At this time, HIIT seems to be a viable tool to improve cardiovascular fitness as part of a multimodal rehabilitation program.

The effects of exercise prerehabilitation programs have been evaluated in different ways. In addition to the 6MWD test and the VO_2 peak tests, including the anaerobic threshold for cardiopulmonary exercise testing, Time Up & Go, grip strength, incremental shuttle walk test, and skeletal muscle mass tests, have been investigated as physical performance predictors with promising results. Nonetheless, further investigation is needed^{30,31}.

Nutrition

Nutrition optimization is a fundamental pillar of cancer prehabilitation programs. Up to eighty percent of cancer patients have been found to have some degree of malnutrition³². These nutritional challenges arise from a complex interplay of factors, with inflammatory mediators playing a particularly significant role³². Additionally, side effects from oncological treatment, such as nausea, vomiting, anorexia, and changes in taste, can contribute to poor nutritional intake. While this issue affects patients with various cancer types, those with head and neck and gastrointestinal cancers are at the highest risk of malnutrition^{33,36}. In head and neck (H&N) cancer patients, malnutrition is a risk factor for mortality^{37,38}. Dysphagia, either from cancer or some of the treatments, like surgery and radiation, has a significant effect on the patient's ability to eat, which often results in malnutrition and the need for a tube-feeding³³.

Similarly, patients with gastrointestinal cancers are particularly susceptible to preoperative malnutrition, with rates as high as 80%³⁹. Dysphagia, obstruction, malabsorption, and nausea are some of the contributors to poor oral intake. Given the direct impact on swallowing, esophageal cancer patients frequently experience dysphagia and weight loss, placing them at a heightened risk of malnutrition^{40,41}. Up to 60% of this patient population is malnourished at the time of surgery⁴². Furthermore, colorectal cancer is associated with moderate to severe malnutrition in about 35% due to its effect on bowel function, especially obstruction⁴³. In hepatopancreatic-biliary cancers, weight loss is common and present in 80% of the patients at the time of diagnosis^{44,45}.

Malnutrition is an independent risk factor for postoperative complications and is considered a cornerstone of cancer prehabilitation programs. Appropriate evaluation and initiation of nutritional therapy reduce surgical complications and accelerate recovery⁴⁶. There is no consensus on what screening tool should be used for the stratification of patients. The tool selection often depends on the type of cancer, patient age, familiarity, and clinical flow

of the medical provider. A review in 2021 studied the effectiveness of several tools in predicting postoperative outcomes⁴⁷. This review found that serum albumin and prealbumin are both effective. Furthermore, assessments such as the Subjective Global Assessment, Prognostic Nutritional Index, Nutrition Risk Score, and Nutrition Risk Screening 2002 are also valuable and applicable tools to determine the nutritional level of colorectal cancer patients⁴⁷. Similarly, these nutritional screening tools were found effective in patients with head and neck cancer and are believed to apply to other disease groups⁴⁸. Subjective Global Assessment is considered the goal standard as it encompasses functional capacity, gastrointestinal symptoms, metabolic stress, weight, and dietary intake, along with physical examination that includes subcutaneous, muscle mass, and edema, which can be time-consuming⁴⁹. Although these tools are validated for screening purposes, none has been studied or found useful in measuring the impact of nutritional prehabilitation interventions.

Although the importance of adequate nutrition in the perioperative period is well recognized, there is no consensus on the prehabilitation interventions or outcome measures. General recommendations include increasing protein intake to meet 1-1.5g/kg of ideal weight^{18,33,36}. However, this is not consistent across prehabilitation studies. The source of protein also can vary from food to protein supplement⁵⁰. Some unimodal nutritional prehabilitation programs have been shown to improve some surgical outcomes. However, they have failed to show improvement in nutritional biomarkers^{34,51}. Nutritional interventions also range from providing nutritional advice to delivering every single meal. Tweed *et al.*⁵² conducted a study to evaluate the feasibility and efficiency of a prehabilitation program where all meals were delivered to subjects for four weeks with the goal of meeting the protein requirements. Minimal information has been published regarding nutrition in head and neck patients. A review study in 2022 evaluated the effect of enriched formula over routine standard formula. The nutritional goal of these studies was to mitigate weight loss. Although patients had good tolerance to both formulas, the studies did not find that the intervention was effective in reducing weight loss, physical function, length of stay, or post-surgical complications.

Despite the lack of direct, measurable effects of nutrition in the literature, there is enough evidence to support nutritional interventions as part of multimodal prehabilitation programs in cancer patients. However, further research should focus on identifying the most accurate reproducible tool to evaluate the effectiveness of nutritional interventions. Additionally, standard protocols should be established depending on the cancer type, patient characteristics, and severity of malnutrition.

Psychological well-being

The prehabilitation process starts during a challenging period of the cancer continuum, soon after diagnosis. At this time, patients are working on understanding their new medical condition, and the amount of information, appointments, and fears could be very overwhelming, and the addition of an exercise and nutrition program could add another level of challenges⁵³. Psychological support can play a crucial role in addressing psychosocial factors such as anxiety, pain, and catastrophizing. By providing emotional support and coping strategies, psychological interventions can enhance patient motivation to participate in other components of the multimodal prehabilitation program and improve overall compliance⁵⁴. A multicenter, international, randomized clinical trial that included 251 patients evaluated the effect of multimodal prehabilitation in the recovery of patients undergoing elective nonmetastatic colorectal cancer. The authors demonstrated that Psychological 1-1 sessions focusing on anxiety management, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, exercise, nutrition, and smoking cessation were statically significantly effective in a faster and better postoperative recovery⁵⁵.

Similar to exercise and nutrition, there are no standards for evaluating prehabilitation psychological interventions. Three studies that evaluated the effectiveness of multimodal prehabilitation in lung cancer utilized two distinct validated tools to determine the baseline of patients' psychological well-being, which includes Hospital Anxiety and Depression Score and the Short Form (SF) 36 questionnaire⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸. Regarding psychological interventions, similar to other cancer populations, there is a considerable variation of techniques to

provide psychological/well-being support during prehabilitation programs¹⁹.

Mood disorders, such as depression, have been linked to prolonged hospitalization⁵⁹. Psychological interventions have proven to be effective in reducing mood disturbances and stress. In a study of 159 patients with prostate cancer undergoing surgical resection, those who received psychological support versus standard care had fewer mood disorders and improved postoperative parameter⁶⁰.

Smoking

Smoking cessation is a vital component of the traditional multimodal prehabilitation program. There is compelling evidence that quitting smoking benefits patients with cardiothoracic tumors, particularly those with lung cancer. Additionally, strong support exists for smoking cessation programs in patients with brain and gastrointestinal cancers who are scheduled for surgery, as smoking is associated with an increased risk of surgical complications^{61,62}. Interventions for smoking tobacco cessation may include counseling, medications, medications, etc.

Conclusion

The growing number of cancer survivors is a testament to advancements in oncological treatment and surgical techniques, allowing for longer life expectancies. Additionally, with further development of minimally invasive surgical techniques, patients who in the past would not be considered surgical candidates are now candidates for curative surgical interventions. Despite the advancements in oncological treatment, the morbidity and physical and functional impact associated with them continue to challenge patients' mobility and functional independence. Medical and physical optimization prior to the start of treatment, especially before surgical interventions, can improve physical activity markers and post-surgical outcomes and accelerate recovery.

Multimodal prehabilitation programs have been shown to impact postoperative outcomes positively. The combination of exercise, nutrition, psychological interventions, and smoking cessation are the four cornerstones of most prehabilitation programs. However, tailored interventions that address specific cancer-related impairments, such as respiratory muscle strengthening in lung cancer patients, should be included. Lastly, although studies utilize validated tools, standardized, prehabilitation-specific interventions, and evaluation tools should be further investigated.

Contribution of the authors

No additional authors.

Ethical considerations

This review article did not have direct contact with human subjects. No IRB approval was needed.

Due to the ethical implications of withholding prehabilitation, a direct comparison between those receiving it and those not is challenging. However, a control group could be established if patients decline participation.

Conflicts of interest

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