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HEALTH BEHAVIOR ENGAGEMENT, OBESITY, AND SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT IN LATINA BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Gloria Juarez, RN, PhD¹, Dara H. Sorkin, PhD², Mienah Sharif, PhD³, Dana B. Mukamel, PhD⁴, Yunan Chen, PhD², Alfred Kobsa, PhD⁴, Alice Police, MD⁴, Sadeeka Al-Majid, PhD⁵, Kelly Biegler, PhD⁴

¹UC Irvine, SanPedro, CA; ²University of California Irvine, Irvine, CA; ³University of California Irvine, Irvine, CA; ⁴UC Irvine, Irvine, CA; ⁵California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, CA

Background: Breast cancer survivors are at risk for weight gain, obesity, and diabetes. Relative to other ethnic groups, Latinas are at even greater risk of diabetes and obesity, and are more likely to experience other breast cancer-related symptoms, including fatigue and negative mood. Symptom burden is further compounded in this population by lower socio-economic status and limited access to resources (e.g., car transportation, specialty medical care). Importantly, engaging in health behavior change to achieve weight loss can significantly reduce the number symptoms and their severity among breast cancer survivors. Thus, understanding the complex interplay of obesity, health-behavior engagement, and symptom experience among a group of high-risk, under-resourced Latina breast cancer survivors is a critical next step for addressing this disparity.

Purpose: To obtain an in-depth understanding of Latina breast cancer survivors' perception of factors that contribute to their own health, and the potential connection between their engagement in particular health behaviors and whether these behaviors alleviated symptoms.

Methods: We conducted 17 focus groups in both English and Spanish with 70 Latina women who had undergone treatment for breast cancer to further understand the role of Hispanic culture in the breast cancer survivor experience, cultural-specific motivators and barriers, as well as symptom burden, to engaging in a healthy lifestyle during survivorship.

Results: A common theme that emerged from the focus groups was that a healthy lifestyle helped alleviate some of their symptoms. Some quotes to provide direct examples include: *"For me, the more that I exercise the more active I feel. I also want to be healthier and to feel better. When I do not exercise I feel more fatigued, more tired. The body is not the same after you have been through a lot."* In response to asking what made her start walking another patient said: *"Well, because I was feeling like I was not feeling good with myself. I was feeling*

bloated and the doctor said that it would probably help....So I did and I just felt better, you know. I know, so I started walking a lot and like 30-40 minutes a day.”

Conclusions: Findings suggest under-resourced, high-risk Latina breast cancer survivors recognize a potentially important link between healthy behavior and symptom management. This awareness has to potential be leveraged to create meaningful lifestyle modification programs.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Gloria Juarez, RN, PhD, UC Irvine, SanPedro, CA, 90732;
gjuarezphd@outlook.com