

Fasting in Cancer Patients: A Challenge for Caregivers

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For many years, several studies have been conducted, and are being conducted as well, on the benefits of fasting and its positive effects on health. The results of the studies mostly confirmed the hypothesis that fasting has positive effects on the body^{1,2}. Fasting in Muslim societies is considered as a religious obligation and rite. According to this religious belief, Muslims are obliged to fast every day for one month (The Ramadan) in a lunar year. Due to the change of seasons, fasting length varies from 10 to 15 hours during a day. Although this method of fasting is strongly recommended for healthy people, there are uncertainties^{3,4} and much more flexibility for patients. In some circumstances, fasting is considered as a self-injuring for patients, and is therefore a sin. One of the diseases which has always been disputed and a challenge for patients, their families and caregivers is cancer because of its inherent uncertainty and nature. There cannot be a single prescription for all patients, since the conditions and health status for every patient may differ due to the complex nature of cancer and the involvement of many organs of the body, as well as the

multiplicity of treatments and stages of the disease, all of which have their own specific characteristics.

On the other hand, an increase in spiritual needs is one of the challenges that cancer patients face during their disease⁵ and can lead to spiritual distress which endangers the spiritual and psychological health of individuals, and as a result, causes the feelings of frustration and emptiness and eliminates the defense mechanisms to deal with the disease. Hence, many patients seek to approach God in order to overcome this tension, and need access to facilities to fulfill their religious duties⁶ one of which is fasting. In other words, the patient may be prevented from fasting due to his/her improper physical conditions, but trying to approach and appeal to God in order to achieve spiritual peace, he/she ignores medical advice and insists on his/her willingness to fast. Considering patient's various beliefs and different interpretations of fasting on one hand, and their health literacy and knowledge of the consequences of fasting on the other hand, it seems necessary for caregivers to consider increasing patients' awareness on their health status and also the possibility

of fasting for them according to their conditions.

Considering the multiplicity of factors that affect religious obligations such as fasting, it is necessary to enlighten patients with an interdisciplinary approach, by using a team consisting of a physician, a nurse, a psychologist, and a spiritual therapist in order to address the patient's questions and to explain why he/she is forbidden from fasting during the Ramadan from different perspectives. Regarding the lack of available evidence about the benefits and harms of fasting in cancer patients, it is difficult to provide evidence-based advice to patients on this matter. Therefore, in most cases, physicians use their own knowledge to give advice to patients. Those pieces of advice may also be affected by their own religious beliefs. Accordingly, regardless of who should inform the patient about the possibility of fasting, the existence of guidelines seems necessary in order to align the recommendations provided for different patients. Although the need for specific guidelines in cancer care is always considered a requirement, this has become one of the challenges for Iranian health system, and has not received much attention despite frequent recommendations⁷. Attending rituals is rooted in the culture, religion, and beliefs of individuals and advices about forbidding them may cause various challenges. Therefore, it's one of the duties of the interdisciplinary team to consider different aspects of the subject in order to make patients see things from other perspectives and convince them through providing them with various reasons. On the other hand, in order to avoid a multiplicity of advice and minimize the effects of individual knowledge and attitudes, it's required to design a valid guideline for providing challenging recommendations.

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