



Cystic Fibrosis Research News

Title:

Social Support is Associated with Fewer Reported Symptoms and Decreased Treatment Burden in Adults with Cystic Fibrosis

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What was your research question?

The current study was conducted to determine if social support was related to health outcomes in adults with cystic fibrosis (CF). Based on previous research and theory, it was hypothesized that those with more social support would have better mental health, physical health, quality of life, and treatment activity.

Why is this important?

Social support is the degree to which an individual reports tangible support (having help in accomplishing tasks), appraisal (having someone to talk to), belonging (having someone to do activities with, and self-esteem (feeling you positively compare to others). In adults with and without chronic illness, social support has been related to a variety of positive health outcomes. Despite this, social support is rarely studied in adults with CF who may face unique challenges to obtaining social support, including frequent hospitalizations, time-consuming treatments, and infection prevention and control procedures that limit contact between patients. Medical care teams are aware of the potential for isolation, but may not encourage social support during clinic visits because they are focused on other issues and because no research is available to demonstrate the importance of social support in adults with CF.

What did you do?

Surveys about social support, mental and physical health symptoms, quality of life, and treatment activity were administered to 250 adults with CF. The participants were also part of a larger longitudinal study on Adult Care in CF. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 65 and were 61% female.

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What did you find?

Those with more social support had fewer mental and physical health symptoms. They also reported functioning better emotionally, socially, and in their societal roles. Those with more social support experienced less burden from their treatments and had improved vitality, body image, and health perceptions. Those with more support also had fewer eating disturbances and digestive symptoms. Having more social support was not related to problems gaining weight, respiratory symptoms, or how individuals were functioning physically. Social support was not related to beliefs or behaviours regarding treatment adherence.

What does this mean and reasons for caution?

In this study, higher levels of social support were related to fewer mental and physical health symptoms, better quality of life in a variety of areas, and less treatment burden. As with any study, there are limitations. First, participants in this study had significant disease-severity, making results less generalizable to healthier adults with CF. Second, the measures of treatment activity used focused on beliefs about treatment and airway clearance treatments completed the previous day. A more thorough measures of treatment adherence is needed.

What's next?

Members of the medical team are encouraged to discuss social support with their patients and patients are encouraged to get involved in virtual events with other adults with CF and seek support opportunities with healthy peers. The CF community would also benefit from social support screenings and interventions.

Original manuscript citation in PubMed

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