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Nutritional and Psychosocial Considerations in Head and Neck Cancer Survivorship: An Integrative Narrative Review

Fatimah Hadi Ahmed Asiri[1], Maha Rashed Alqahtani[2], Bayan Nawaf Alshammari[3], Ali Ahmed Khadhi[4], Khalid Fahad Alharbi[5], Zamzam Nawaf Alshammari[6], Basmah Adel S Alsoudmi[7], Nawaf Monahi D Alotaibi[8], Maher Sajdi Mashal Alotaibi[9], Obaid Salman Tamim Aldossary[10]

1 Aljamoom Primary Healthcare, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
2 King Faisal Hospital, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
3 Alradifa Phc, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
4 Almujasas, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
5 Al-Talaa Health Center, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
6 Asfan Phc, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
7 Al-Husseini Primary Care Center, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
8 Dawadmi General Hospital, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
9 Mohammadiyah Health Center In Sager, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
10 Wadi Al-Dwasser General Hospital, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Background: Head and neck cancer (HNC) survivorship presents complex challenges that extend beyond tumor eradication, profoundly impacting nutritional status, psychological wellbeing, and social functioning. The multimodal treatments often cause lasting sequelae including dysphagia, xerostomia, and tissue damage, requiring coordinated interdisciplinary management.

Aim: This narrative review synthesizes evidence on the integrated management of HNC survivors, focusing on the intersection of oncology nursing, dental care, clinical nutrition, psychosocial support, and laboratory monitoring.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was conducted across PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and PsycINFO databases (2013-2025) using keywords related to HNC survivorship, nutrition, psychosocial care, and interdisciplinary management. The review included clinical trials, observational studies, systematic reviews, and clinical guidelines.

Results: Evidence demonstrates that integrated care models significantly improve outcomes across domains. Proactive dental interventions reduce osteoradionecrosis risk by 60%, while specialized dysphagia management decreases aspiration pneumonia incidence. Psychosocial interventions address the 30-40% depression prevalence among survivors, and systematic nutritional support prevents severe weight loss. Regular laboratory monitoring enables early detection of endocrine dysfunction and nutritional deficiencies.

Conclusion: HNC survivorship requires an integrated, proactive approach addressing the interconnected physical, nutritional, and psychosocial sequelae. Future care models should prioritize standardized interdisciplinary protocols that bridge specialty divides to optimize quality of life for this vulnerable population.

Keywords: head and neck cancer survivorship, dysphagia management, osteoradionecrosis, psychosocial support, interdisciplinary care.

Introduction

Head and neck cancer (HNC) represents a diverse group of malignancies affecting the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, and associated structures, with approximately 66,000 new cases diagnosed annually in the United States alone (Siegel et al., 2020). While treatment advances have improved survival rates, the sequelae of intensive multimodal therapies—including surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy—create profound and lasting challenges for survivors. The anatomical location of these cancers and their treatments inevitably impact fundamental human functions: breathing, swallowing, communication, and facial appearance, resulting in complex survivorship needs that extend far beyond tumor eradication (Ringash et al., 2018).

The multidimensional nature of HNC survivorship demands an integrated approach that bridges multiple specialties. Oncology nursing provides continuous coordination and symptom management throughout the care continuum. Dental professionals play a crucial role in preventing and managing oral complications, particularly osteoradionecrosis (ORN) of the jaw, a devastating consequence of radiation therapy. Clinical nutritionists address the pervasive challenges of

*Corresponding author e-mail: Fattasiri@hotmail.com (Fatimah Hadi Ahmed Asiri).

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dysphagia, xerostomia, and altered taste that threaten nutritional status. Social workers confront the substantial psychosocial burden, including depression, anxiety, body image concerns, and financial toxicity. Laboratory monitoring provides objective data on nutritional status, endocrine function, and potential recurrence (Maghami & Ho, 2018). Despite recognition of these interconnected needs, care fragmentation remains common, with survivors often navigating disconnected specialty services without comprehensive coordination

The consequences of unaddressed survivorship needs are severe. Malnutrition affects 30-50% of HNC patients during treatment and often persists into survivorship, contributing to functional decline and reduced quality of life (Ottosson et al., 2014). Psychosocial distress, including depression and anxiety, affects up to 40% of survivors, frequently complicated by social isolation and financial hardship due to treatment-related work limitations (Hazazi, 2025). Dental complications, particularly ORN, can lead to chronic pain, pathological fractures, and the need for extensive reconstructive surgery. These intersecting challenges create a survivorship experience characterized by complex trade-offs between survival outcomes and quality of life.

This narrative review aims to synthesize current evidence regarding the integrated management of nutritional and psychosocial aspects of HNC survivorship. Specifically, it will examine: (1) the role of oncology nursing in care coordination and symptom management; (2) dental strategies for preventing and managing post-radiation complications; (3) nutritional interventions for dysphagia and malnutrition; (4) psychosocial support for mental health and financial challenges; and (5) the importance of laboratory monitoring in survivorship care. By integrating perspectives across these domains, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for optimizing HNC survivorship care through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Methodology

This narrative review employed a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant literature published between 2013 and 2025. Electronic databases including PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and PsycINFO were searched using a combination of keywords and medical subject headings related to head and neck cancer survivorship, nutrition, psychosocial aspects, and interdisciplinary care. Specific search terms included: "head and neck neoplasms/rehabilitation," "cancer survivors," "survivorship," "dysphagia," "osteoradionecrosis," "nutrition therapy," "psychosocial support systems," "financial toxicity," "interdisciplinary care," and "oncology nursing." The search was limited to human studies published in English.

The inclusion criteria encompassed clinical trials, observational studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and clinical practice guidelines that addressed nutritional, dental, psychosocial, or nursing aspects of HNC survivorship. Studies focusing solely on acute treatment phase without survivorship implications, case reports, and editorials were excluded.

Given the heterogeneous nature of the evidence and the integrative aim of this review, a narrative synthesis approach was employed rather than systematic review methodology. The findings were organized thematically to address the key domains of HNC survivorship care, with particular attention to intersections between specialties. The quality of evidence was considered throughout the synthesis, with preference given to higher-quality studies including randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews where available.

Oncology Nursing: The Cornerstone of Survivorship Care

Oncology nurses serve as the consistent thread throughout the HNC survivorship trajectory, providing essential coordination, education, and symptom management. Their role begins during pre-treatment planning and extends indefinitely into survivorship, making them uniquely positioned to identify evolving needs and facilitate appropriate interventions (Greedy et al., 2022). The complex nature of HNC sequelae requires nurses to possess specialized knowledge across multiple domains, from wound care and symptom management to psychosocial support and rehabilitation guidance.

Comprehensive Symptom Management

The symptom burden in HNC survivors is multifaceted and often persistent. Oncology nurses manage a complex array of treatment-related sequelae including xerostomia, dysgeusia, fatigue, pain, and mucosal sensitivity. Evidence-based protocols for symptom management have demonstrated significant improvements in quality of life when implemented systematically. For example, structured nursing interventions for xerostomia—combining education on saliva substitutes, stimulation techniques, and preventive dental care—have shown superior outcomes compared to routine care (Kagan et al., 2020). Similarly, nurse-led fatigue management programs incorporating activity pacing, energy conservation, and sleep hygiene strategies help survivors maintain functional capacity during recovery.

Pain management represents another critical nursing domain, particularly given the transition from acute treatment-related pain to chronic neuropathic or musculoskeletal pain in survivorship. Nurses play a pivotal role in medication management, non-pharmacological intervention implementation, and coordination with pain specialists when needed. The development of chronic pain conditions in approximately 30% of HNC survivors necessitates long-term nursing management strategies that balance adequate pain control with minimization of opioid-related risks (Ye et al., 2022).

Care Coordination and Transition Management

The transition from active treatment to survivorship care represents a vulnerable period for HNC patients, often characterized by reduced monitoring frequency and uncertainty about managing persistent symptoms. Oncology nurses facilitate this transition through structured survivorship care planning that clearly outlines follow-up schedules, self-management strategies, and indications for seeking urgent care (Russell et al., 2020; Mirabile et al., 2016). The development and implementation of survivorship care plans (SCPs) has been associated with improved patient satisfaction, better adherence to surveillance recommendations, and more appropriate healthcare utilization.

Nurse-led survivorship clinics have emerged as effective models for delivering comprehensive follow-up care. These clinics typically provide holistic assessment, routine surveillance, symptom management, and coordination with other specialists as needed. Studies comparing nurse-led versus physician-led follow-up have demonstrated equivalent outcomes for recurrence detection and survival, with higher patient satisfaction and more attention to psychosocial and lifestyle issues in nurse-led models (Braat et al., 2022; Ward & Coyne, 2023). This approach efficiently utilizes healthcare resources while addressing the multifaceted nature of survivorship needs.

Dental Considerations: Preventing and Managing Osteoradionecrosis

Dental management in HNC survivorship focuses predominantly on preventing osteoradionecrosis (ORN), a severe complication characterized by exposed, non-healing bone in irradiated fields that persists for at least three months. The risk of ORN continues indefinitely after radiation therapy, necessitating lifelong dental vigilance (Dhanda et al., 2016). The pathophysiology involves radiation-induced tissue injury that compromises vascular supply and cellular function, creating a hypoxic, hypocellular, and hypovascular tissue environment vulnerable to necrosis.

Pre-Radiation Dental Planning and Prevention

The foundation of ORN prevention begins before radiation initiation with a comprehensive dental evaluation and necessary interventions. Current guidelines recommend dental clearance 2-3 weeks before radiation start, allowing adequate healing time for any required extractions or periodontal therapy (Sultan et al., 2017). Pre-radiation dental management typically includes: (1) comprehensive examination with panoramic radiography; (2) elimination of potential sources of infection through extractions of non-restorable teeth, particularly in high-dose radiation fields; (3) management of periodontal disease; (4) dental prophylaxis; and (5) fabrication of fluoride trays for patients receiving radiation to salivary glands.

The decision regarding which teeth to extract before radiation involves careful consideration of multiple factors, including tooth prognosis, position relative to radiation fields, and planned radiation dose. Generally, teeth with a poor prognosis (severe periodontitis, extensive caries, periapical pathology) within the radiation field should be extracted, while questionable teeth outside the primary radiation beams may be preserved with close monitoring (Sultan et al., 2017). This risk-stratified approach balances the immediate trauma of extraction against the long-term risk of ORN development.

Post-Radiation Dental Management and ORN Treatment

Following radiation completion, lifelong specialized dental care is essential. This includes meticulous oral hygiene, daily fluoride applications, and regular professional care every 3-4 months initially, extending to 6-month intervals after the first year if oral health remains stable (Alsahli et al., 2024; Almishkhas et al., 2025). Dental procedures in irradiated patients require special considerations, including antibiotic prophylaxis for invasive procedures, atraumatic technique, and possible hyperbaric oxygen therapy for high-risk cases.

When ORN develops, management depends on the disease stage and response to conservative measures. Early-stage ORN may respond to conservative approaches, including local wound care, antimicrobial rinses, and pentoxifylline with tocopherol, which has shown promise in promoting healing in early ORN (Paiva et al., 2023). Advanced cases with pathological fractures or persistent pain often require surgical intervention, including sequestrectomy, resection, and microvascular reconstruction. The successful management of established ORN typically requires a multidisciplinary approach involving oral medicine, oral surgery, and hyperbaric medicine specialists. Figure 1 illustrates the complementary roles of registered nurses and dentists within community health security initiatives.

Nutritional Management: Addressing Dysphagia and Malnutrition

Nutritional compromise represents one of the most pervasive challenges in HNC survivorship, with profound implications for quality of life, functional status, and overall survival. The multifactorial etiology includes mechanical obstruction from tumor or treatment effects, neurological impairment from nerve damage, and physiological changes including mucositis, xerostomia, and dysgeusia (Ottosson et al., 2014). Nutritional interventions must therefore address both the physiological and sensory aspects of eating while accommodating evolving functional capabilities throughout the survivorship trajectory.

Figure 1: Roles of Registered Nurses and Dentists Under Health Security Programs Within Communities

Dysphagia Management and Rehabilitation

Dysphagia affects up to 50% of long-term HNC survivors, contributing to malnutrition, dehydration, aspiration pneumonia, and diminished quality of life (Wall et al., 2017). Effective management begins with comprehensive assessment using instrumental evaluations such as videofluoroscopic swallow studies or fiberoptic endoscopic evaluation of swallowing. These objective assessments guide the development of targeted intervention strategies, which may include compensatory techniques, therapeutic exercises, and dietary modifications.

Swallowing rehabilitation should ideally begin before treatment initiation (prophylactic exercises) and continue throughout survivorship. Evidence supports the efficacy of specific exercise protocols, including the Shaker exercise, Masako maneuver, and effortful swallow, for improving swallowing physiology and biomechanics (Charters et al., 2024; Hajdú et al., 2019). The timing and intensity of these interventions appear critical to their success, with higher adherence and more intensive protocols associated with superior outcomes. Emerging approaches such as neuromuscular electrical stimulation and transcutaneous stimulation show promise as adjuncts to traditional exercise-based therapies.

Nutritional Support Strategies

Nutritional intervention in HNC survivorship progresses through several phases, from acute support during treatment to long-term adaptation in survivorship. During active treatment, the primary goals are maintaining nutritional status and supporting tissue healing, often requiring enteral nutrition via feeding tube. The transition to oral intake represents a critical phase where careful advancement of diet texture and consistency, coupled with swallowing therapy, supports safe and adequate oral nutrition (Ottosson et al., 2014).

Long-term nutritional management focuses on adapting to persistent changes in swallowing function, salivation, and taste perception. Dietary modifications typically include texture alteration (soft, moist foods), moisture enhancement (sauces, gravies), and nutrient density optimization. Commercial thickeners can improve safety for liquids, while flavor enhancement strategies help compensate for taste alterations (Wall et al., 2017). Registered dietitians play an essential role in developing individualized nutrition plans that accommodate functional limitations while meeting nutritional requirements and respecting food preferences (Table 1).

Table 1: Interdisciplinary Management of Common HNC Survivorship Challenges

Challenge	Contributing Disciplines	Key Interventions	Monitoring Parameters
Dysphagia	Speech-language pathology, Clinical nutrition, Nursing	Swallowing therapy, Diet texture modification, Feeding tube management	Weight trends, Aspiration events, Dietary intake logs
Osteoradionecrosis Risk	Dentistry, Oral surgery, Radiation oncology	Pre-radiation dental care, Daily fluoride, Regular monitoring	Oral mucosal integrity, Dental health, Pain assessment
Malnutrition	Clinical nutrition, Nursing, Gastroenterology	Nutritional supplementation, Enteral nutrition, Dietary counseling	Body weight, Albumin/prealbumin, Nutrient intake
Psychosocial Distress	Social work, Psychology, Psychiatry, Nursing	Counseling, Support groups, Pharmacotherapy	Depression/anxiety screening, Quality of life measures
Financial Toxicity	Social work, Financial counseling, Nursing	Benefits navigation, Coping strategies, Resource connection	Out-of-pocket costs, Medication adherence, Employment status

Psychosocial Support: Addressing Mental Health and Financial Toxicity

The psychosocial impact of HNC and its treatment represents a critical dimension of survivorship that significantly influences quality of life and functional outcomes. The visible nature of treatment effects, alterations in fundamental communication and eating functions, and persistent symptom burden create unique psychological challenges that require specialized support approaches (Lydiatt et al., 2009). Additionally, the financial consequences of treatment and its impact on employment create substantial stress for survivors and their families.

Mental Health Considerations

Depression and anxiety disorders affect approximately 30-40% of HNC survivors, rates substantially higher than those observed in many other cancer populations (Cheng et al., 2024; Calver et al., 2018). Risk factors include advanced disease stage, extensive treatment, pre-existing mental health conditions, and limited social support. The clinical presentation may differ from typical depression, with prominent irritability, social withdrawal, and demoralization related to functional losses and altered body image.

Evidence supports several intervention approaches for addressing mental health needs in HNC survivors. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) adapted for cancer survivors has demonstrated efficacy in reducing depressive and anxious symptoms, particularly when it addresses cancer-specific concerns such as fear of recurrence and body image distress (Asare et al., 2020; ElKefi & Asan, 2021). Support groups specifically for HNC survivors provide valuable peer support and practical coping strategies. For many survivors, psychopharmacological management represents an important component of comprehensive care, particularly when symptoms significantly impact functioning or response to psychotherapy is limited. Figure 2 summarizes key nutritional and psychosocial challenges experienced by head and neck cancer survivors.

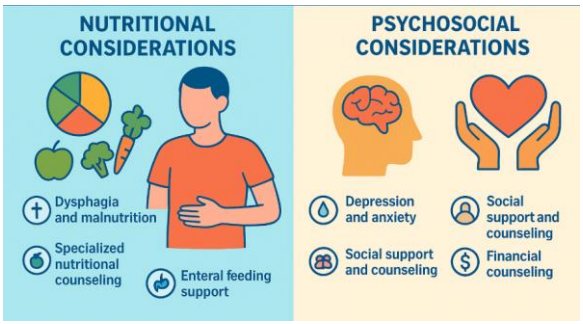

Figure 2: Nutritional and Psychosocial Considerations in Head and Neck Cancer Survivorship

Financial Toxicity and Social Support

Financial toxicity—the financial burden experienced by cancer patients and their families—disproportionately affects HNC survivors due to treatment intensity, prolonged recovery periods, and frequent impact on employment. Approximately 40% of HNC survivors report significant financial stress, with many depleting savings, accruing debt, or making treatment-related decisions based on cost rather than optimal outcomes (Halpern et al., 2023). The functional limitations resulting from HNC treatment often compromise employment, creating additional financial pressure through lost income.

Social workers play a crucial role in mitigating financial toxicity through benefits counseling, assistance programs, and resource connections. Early identification of financial vulnerability allows for proactive intervention before financial consequences become severe. Practical support may include assistance with disability applications, connection to pharmaceutical assistance programs, and guidance on medical bill management (Yabroff et al., 2019). Additionally, addressing social isolation through peer support programs and community resources helps buffer the psychological impact of financial stress.

Laboratory Monitoring in Survivorship Care

Systematic laboratory monitoring provides objective data to guide survivorship management across multiple domains, from nutritional status to disease surveillance. The frequency and focus of laboratory assessment evolve throughout the survivorship trajectory, with more intensive monitoring during early survivorship transitioning to targeted assessment based on individual risk factors and persistent symptoms (Goetz et al., 2024).

Nutritional and Metabolic Parameters

Regular assessment of nutritional parameters helps identify evolving deficiencies and guide nutritional interventions. Key markers include albumin, prealbumin, complete blood count, and comprehensive metabolic panel. These parameters should be monitored at regular intervals during active treatment and early survivorship, with frequency tailored to individual nutritional status and recovery trajectory (Ackerman et al., 2018). Prealbumin's shorter half-life makes it particularly useful for monitoring response to nutritional interventions, while albumin provides information about chronic nutritional status.

Endocrine dysfunction represents another important consideration, particularly for survivors who received radiation involving the cervical region. Thyroid function tests (TSH, free T4) should be assessed at least annually for patients with radiation fields encompassing the thyroid, as hypothyroidism develops in 20-30% of these survivors (Cohen et al., 2019). Similarly, monitoring for hypothalamic-pituitary axis dysfunction is important for survivors

with radiation fields extending to the skull base. Early detection of endocrine abnormalities allows for timely intervention that can significantly impact quality of life and functional status.

Surveillance for Recurrence and Second Malignancies

Laboratory assessment also contributes to disease surveillance, though its role is complementary to physical examination and imaging. While no tumor markers have established utility for routine HNC surveillance, certain laboratory findings may raise concern for recurrence or second malignancies. Unexplained anemia, for example, may prompt evaluation for recurrence or second primary tumors in the aerodigestive tract (Alshadwi et al., 2013). Similarly, electrolyte abnormalities may indicate paraneoplastic syndromes or complications of recurrence.

The development of second primary tumors represents a significant concern in HNC survivorship, with an annual risk of 3-7%—the highest of any cancer population (Siegel et al., 2020). This risk necessitates ongoing vigilance through regular physical examination and appropriate imaging, with laboratory assessment providing supportive data. For survivors with human papillomavirus (HPV)-related cancers, emerging research suggests potential utility in HPV DNA monitoring, though this approach remains investigational for routine clinical practice.

Integrated Care Models and Future Directions

The complex, interconnected nature of HNC survivorship challenges necessitates integrated care models that bridge specialty divides. Traditional siloed approaches often result in fragmented care, communication gaps, and unmet needs, particularly at interface points between specialties (Lo Nigro et al., 2017). Developing effective interdisciplinary models requires addressing both structural barriers (scheduling, coordination, reimbursement) and cultural barriers (specialty-specific perspectives, communication styles).

Elements of Successful Integrated Care

Successful integrated care models share several common characteristics, including defined communication pathways, shared medical records, co-located services when feasible, and clear role definitions. Multidisciplinary survivorship clinics that bring together relevant specialists for coordinated appointments have demonstrated improvements in patient satisfaction, care efficiency, and clinical outcomes (Jefford et al., 2022). These models typically feature case conferences where complex patients are discussed collectively, ensuring cohesive care planning across disciplines.

Technology-enabled solutions offer promising approaches for enhancing care integration, particularly for survivors facing geographic or mobility barriers. Telehealth platforms can facilitate virtual multidisciplinary consultations, remote monitoring of symptoms, and delivery of supportive care interventions (Chan et al., 2021). Patient portals with tailored educational resources and communication tools empower survivors to actively participate in their care while improving access to the care team between visits.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite progress in understanding HNC survivorship needs, significant knowledge gaps remain. More research is needed to determine optimal timing and intensity of rehabilitative interventions, strategies for preventing late effects, and approaches for personalizing survivorship care based on individual risk profiles (Ringash et al., 2018). Additionally, comparative effectiveness research examining different care delivery models would inform implementation of integrated survivorship programs.

Future directions should also include greater attention to health disparities in HNC survivorship outcomes. Vulnerable populations, including those with low socioeconomic status, limited health literacy, and racial/ethnic minority groups, experience disproportionately poor survivorship outcomes (Yabroff et al., 2019). Developing and implementing equitable care models that address these disparities represents an essential priority for the field (Table 2).

Table 2: Timeline for Key Survivorship Interventions and Monitoring

Time Period	Priority Interventions	Monitoring Focus	Special Considerations
Acute post-treatment (0-3 months)	Wound care, Pain management, Enteral nutrition weaning, Early rehabilitation	Treatment toxicity, Nutritional status, Wound healing	High risk for treatment complications, Intensive support needs
Early Survivorship (3-12 months)	Swallowing therapy, Dental rehabilitation, Psychosocial assessment, Return-to-work planning	Functional recovery, Psychosocial adaptation, Disease surveillance	Period of greatest functional improvement, Evolving supportive care needs
Long-Term Survivorship (>1 year)	Maintenance rehabilitation, Chronic symptom management, Health promotion, Late effects screening	Late effects, Second primaries, Quality of life, Psychosocial wellbeing	Need for lifelong monitoring, Adaptation to persistent changes

Conclusion

HNC survivorship represents a complex clinical scenario requiring integrated, proactive management across multiple domains. The intersecting challenges of dysphagia, nutritional compromise, dental vulnerability, psychosocial distress, and functional limitation necessitate coordinated interdisciplinary care that begins before treatment initiation and continues throughout the survivorship trajectory. Oncology nurses serve as essential care coordinators, while dental, nutritional, psychosocial, and laboratory medicine specialists provide domain-specific expertise that collectively addresses the full spectrum of survivorship needs.

The evidence synthesized in this review supports several key conclusions. First, proactive management—including pre-treatment dental care, swallowing exercises, and nutritional support—can prevent or mitigate many survivorship challenges. Second, regular systematic assessment across domains allows for early identification of emerging issues before they become severe. Third, integrated care models that facilitate communication and coordination across specialties produce superior outcomes compared to siloed approaches. Finally, attention to psychosocial and financial aspects is essential for comprehensive survivorship care that truly addresses quality of life.

Moving forward, the field must continue to develop and implement evidence-based interdisciplinary care pathways while addressing disparities in survivorship outcomes. Future research should focus on optimizing timing and intensity of interventions, personalizing approaches based on individual risk profiles, and evaluating novel care delivery models. Through continued advancement in interdisciplinary survivorship care, the field can ensure that HNC survivors no longer live longer but also live better, with optimized function and quality of life throughout their survivorship journey.

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