

Older Adults Seeking Cancer Information and Support Online: Results From a National Sample of Program Attendees

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Rationale

Adults age 65+ who are facing cancer may have significant needs, some of which can be met with readily available online resources. Although internet adoption is lower in older adults than among the general population (Pew Research Center, 2014), the extent to which older adults utilize online cancer resources has received less attention. The Cancer Support Community (CSC) sought to better understand how older adults diagnosed with cancer utilize online cancer information and support.

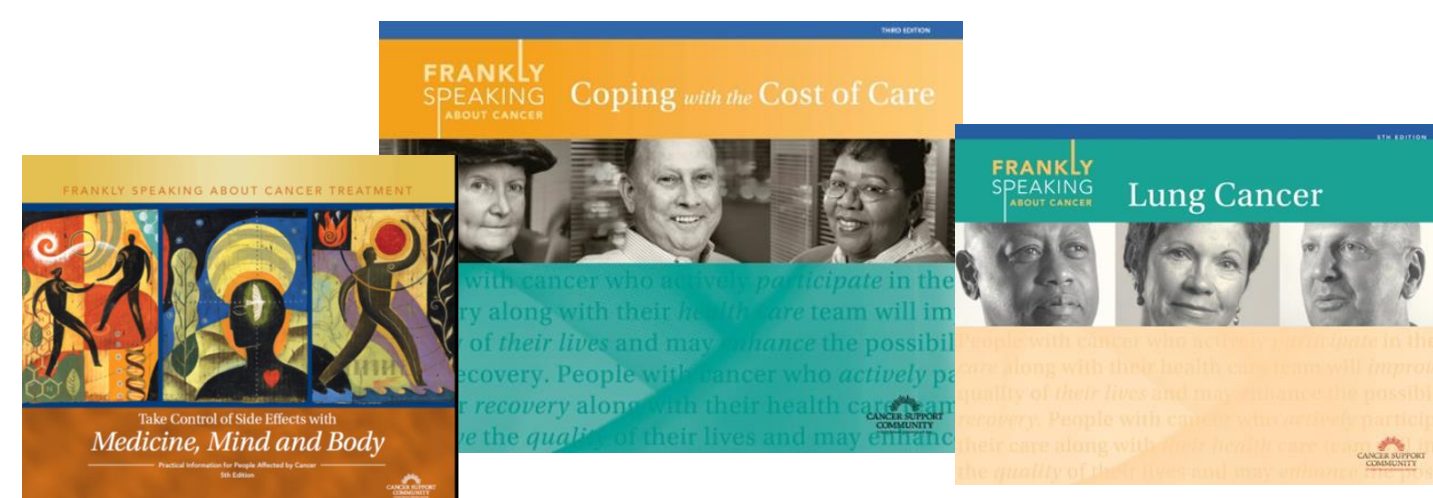
Objective

- To better understand online information-seeking and emotional support utilization patterns of older adults who actively seek out cancer information and support
- To compare older adults with younger adults in terms of utilization of online cancer-related resources

Frankly Speaking About Cancer Program Background

The *Frankly Speaking About Cancer* (FSAC) series provides in-depth coverage of topics relevant to those affected by cancer that are often not otherwise available in a comprehensive format.

Topics covered include: metastatic breast cancer, lung cancer, skin cancer, colorectal cancer, cancer treatments and side effects, new discoveries, and coping with the cost of care. *Frankly Speaking About Cancer* is delivered through multiple modalities, including in-person workshops, print publications, online content, and a weekly radio show.



Synopsis of Research

Attendees of FSAC psychoeducational workshops at CSC affiliates nationwide completed post-workshop evaluations. Attendees reported online resource and support utilization in addition to workshop outcomes. Attendees were mostly Caucasian, female, and averaged 58 years old. These analyses focused on attendees at least 65 years old ($N = 2,178$) with cancer.

Online cancer information seekers were significantly younger than attendees not going online for cancer information. While older adults sought information/support online, they were less likely than younger workshop attendees to both search for information online and participate in online support groups.

Methods

Respondents

- The current analyses focused exclusively on 2,178 individuals diagnosed with cancer who attended a FSAC psychoeducational workshop between 2009-2015 and who were at least 65 years old.
- From 2009-2015, 10,492 FSAC workshop attendees nationwide completed post-workshop surveys (75% response rate).
- Of workshop attendees ages 65+, most (66.9%) had been diagnosed with cancer or are a cancer survivor. The remainder were caregivers or healthcare providers.

Survey Measures:

- Background/demographic characteristics
- Cancer history
- Cancer-related knowledge (pre-workshop)
- Primary source of emotional support
- Sources of informational support
- Support group participation

Respondent Characteristics

$N = 2,178$

Background Characteristics:

(of those 65+ years and diagnosed with cancer)

- Age: $M = 71.5$ years ($SD = 5.4$ years)
- Sex: 72.7% female
- Racial Identification:
 - 86.5% Caucasian
 - 6.6% African-American
 - 3.5% Asian
 - 2.2% Hispanic

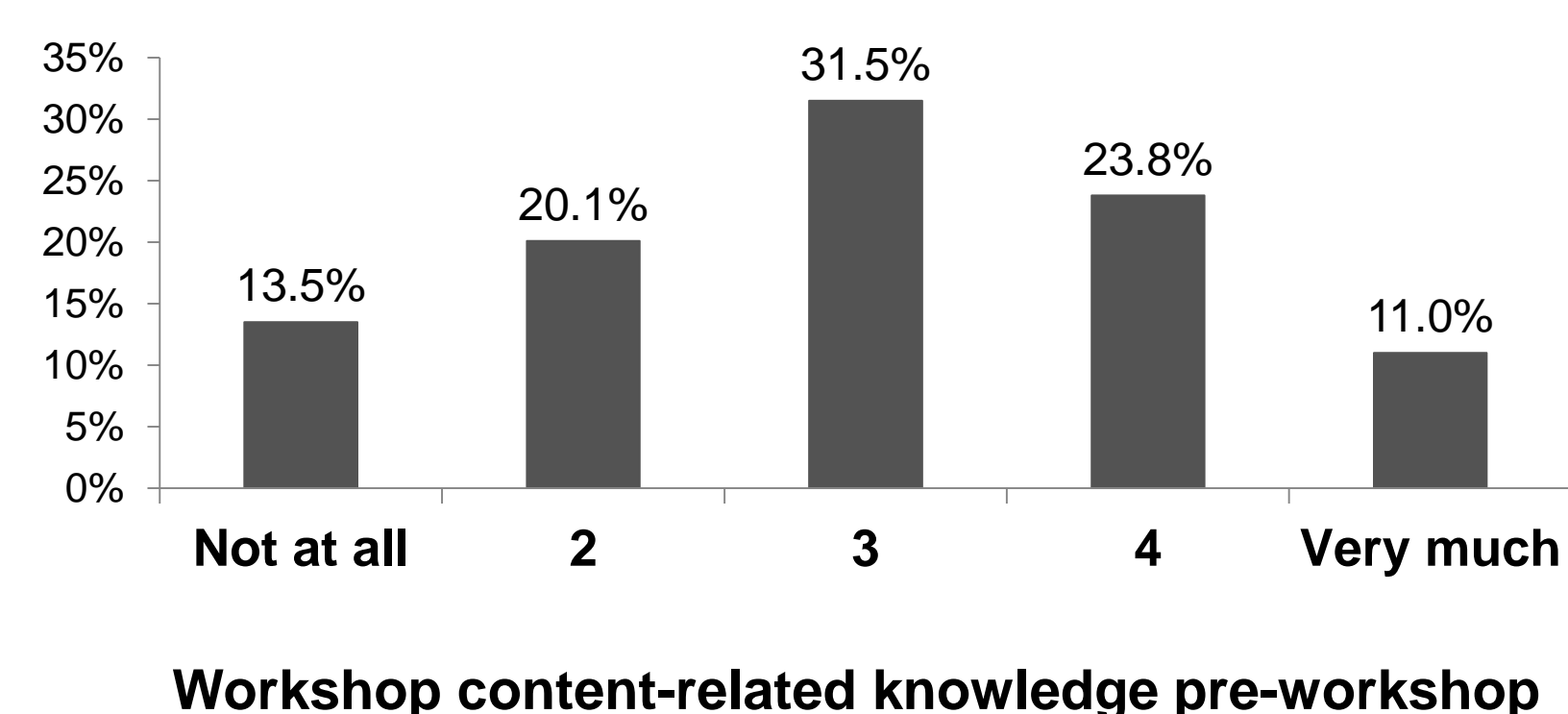
Cancer History:

- Approximately half (51.1%) had breast cancer
- 35.5% diagnosed with metastatic disease

Time Since Diagnosis:

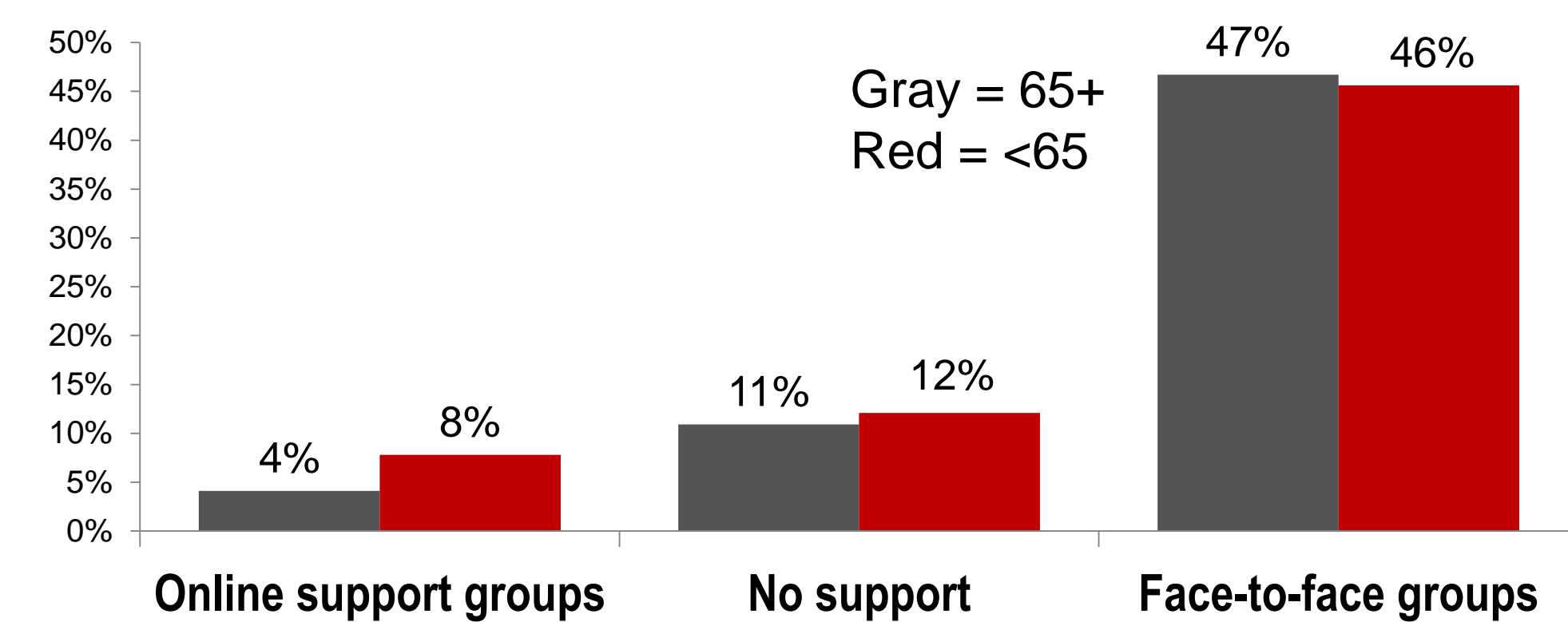
- 32.3% of older adults diagnosed in the past year
- 30.4% diagnosed between 1-5 years ago
- 29.5% diagnosed 5+ years ago

Cancer Knowledge:



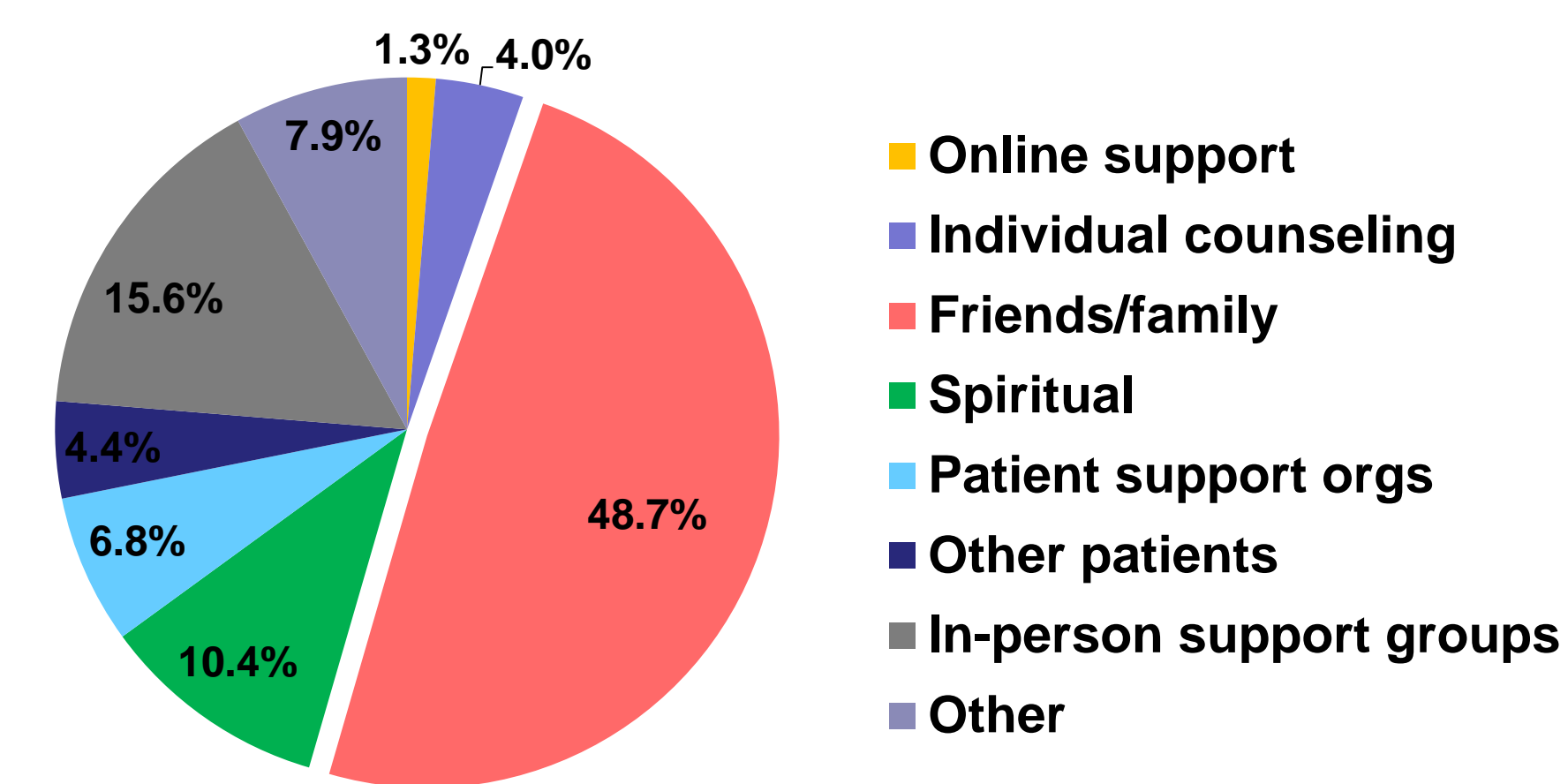
Cancer Support Groups

Support Group Participation, by Age



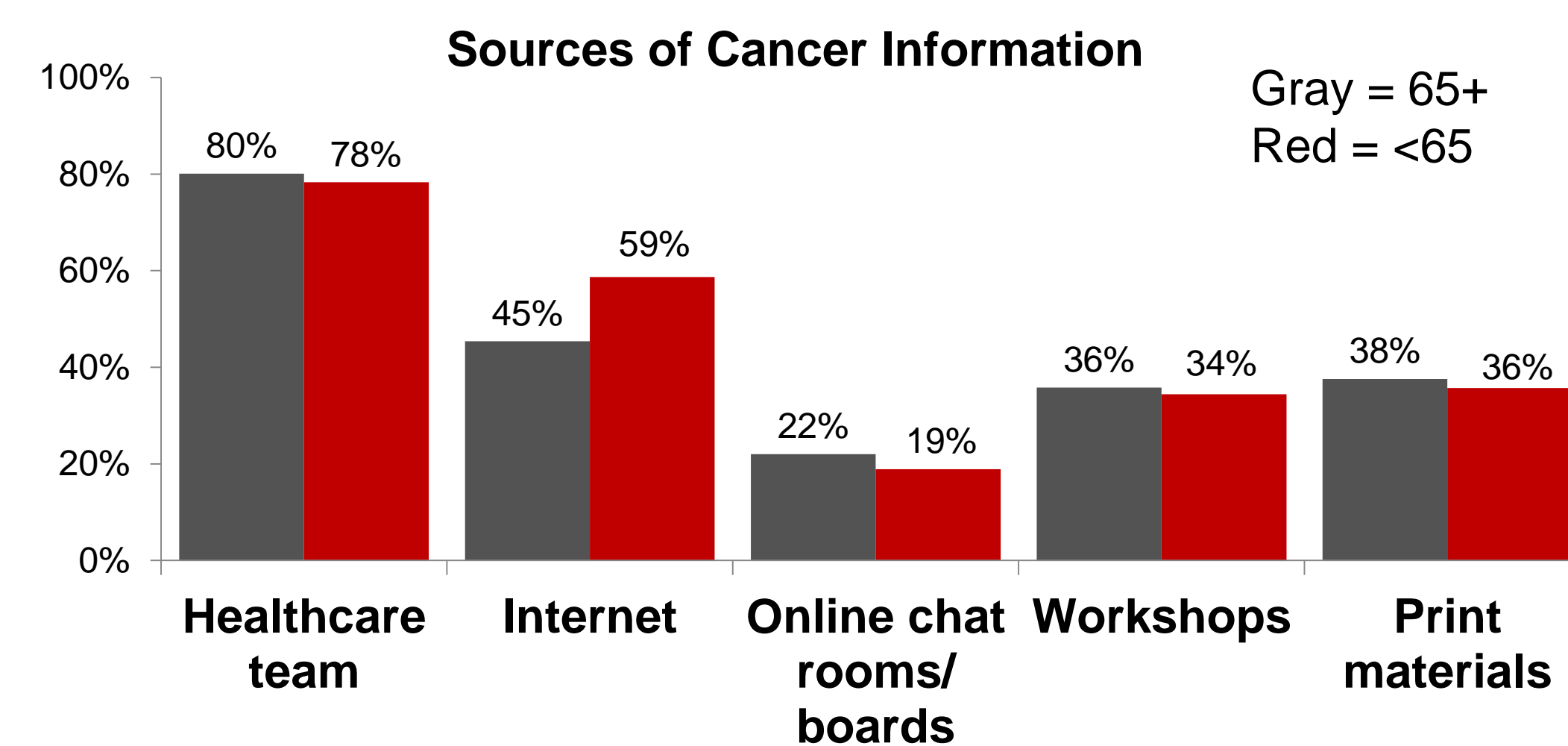
- While seeking emotional support online to help cope with cancer was low overall, it was statistically significantly lower among adults 65+ compared with younger adults ($\chi^2 = 31.4$; $p < .01$)

Primary Source for Emotional Support



- Few adults 65+ (1.3%) report that online support is the first place they turn for emotional support

Information-Seeking



- Compared with younger workshop attendees, older adults were less likely to search for information online ($\chi^2 = 137.8$; $p < .01$)
- Utilization of online chat rooms or message boards did not differ between age groups.
- Online cancer information seekers were significantly younger than attendees not utilizing the internet for this reason ($t = 14.7$, $p < .01$; $M = 56.2$ years; $SD = 12.9$, and $M = 60.3$ years, $SD = 12.9$, respectively).

Cancer Knowledge and Internet Behaviors

Participants aged 65+ reported a slightly greater level of cancer-related knowledge than those younger than 65

Age	Mean Knowledge	SD	F	Significance
65 +	3.1	1.2	6.3	$p < .05$
< 65	2.9	1.2		

Participants aged 65+ who searched for cancer information online reported a greater level of cancer-related knowledge than those who do not search online

Information Online	Mean Knowledge	SD	F	Significance
Yes	3.3	1.1	74.6	$p < .01$
No	2.9	1.2		

Summary & Discussion

- Older adults do access cancer-related information online, but at lower rates than adults under age 65; greater utilization of online information is associated with greater perceived knowledge about cancer.
- Online support groups are much less commonly accessed as a primary source of emotional support for adults across all ages as compared to other cancer support resources.
- Results from this sample of workshop attendees support findings from other recent national surveys assessing online behaviors in older adults and offer additional insights into how cancer information and support is approached by older adults diagnosed with cancer.

Implications

Research Implications:

- National surveys suggest that older adults can have practical barriers to Internet use or are late adopters of online resources, and our finding support this trend among cancer survivors and caregivers who attend in-person workshops. Additional research examining how older adults' access and utilization of online support and information can be enhanced will be important to tailoring cancer support to their needs.

Practice Implications:

- In-person cancer support remains an important resource for many cancer survivors and their caregivers. Additional educational programming and support to enhance older adults' access to and use of cancer-related internet resources may be beneficial.

References

Pew Research Center, April 3, 2014. Older adults and technology use. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/>

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