

# Quality of Life, Survivorship, and Psychosocial Adjustment of Young Women With Breast Cancer After Breast-Conserving Surgery and Radiation Therapy

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To examine changes in quality of life (QOL), psychosocial adjustment, and survivorship issues over time of women younger than 45 years who underwent breast-conserving surgery and radiation therapy (RT) for breast cancer.

**Design:** Repeated measures, longitudinal design.

**Methods:** Data were collected at four time points: start of RT, midpoint of RT, end of RT, and six months after RT. Three instruments were used to collect data: Quality-of-Life Index, Psychosocial Adjustment to Illness Scale, and the newly developed Adaptation to Survivorship Experience. Subjects also participated in an in-depth interview at the start of RT.

**Setting:** A large radiation oncology department located in an urban teaching hospital in the Northeast United States.

**Sample:** 23 women with newly diagnosed stage I or II breast cancer who were starting RT following breast-conserving surgery, with a mean age of 37.8 years (range = 25–45 years).

**Main Research Variables:** QOL, psychosocial adjustment, and adaptation to survivorship experience.

**Findings:** Although subjects adjusted their lives to accommodate RT, QOL declined from the start of RT to midpoint, with gradual improvement reported six months later. Social and sexual adjustment declined from start of RT to six months later. Negative perceptions of the survivorship experience and worry about cancer increased from the start of RT to six months later.

**Conclusions:** Young women with breast cancer experience changes in QOL, psychosocial adjustment, and adaptation to survivorship issues during RT. Changes may not reflect what is observed in clinical practice.

**Implications for Nursing Practice:** Nurses need to be aware of changes in QOL, psychosocial adjustment, and survivorship to better understand and support young women during RT.

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ The overall incidence of breast cancer in younger women is low.
- ▶ Young age is a prognostic but not predictive factor in survival.
- ▶ Varying definitions of 'younger women' are used in research.
- ▶ Quality of life and psychosocial adjustment decline during radiation therapy.
- ▶ Age-related differences in quality of life and survivorship exist with breast cancer.

(Greenlee, Murray, Bolden, & Wingo, 2000). Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results Program (SEER) data from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) indicate that breast cancer incidence rates are decreasing among younger women (Greenlee et al.). However, breast cancer occurring in young women has been associated with high-risk disease, poorer survival, decreased psychosocial adjustment, and loss of productive years (Swanson & Lin, 1994). The purpose of this article is to report on the results of a descriptive study that examined changes in quality of life (QOL), psychosocial adjustment, and survivorship issues over time in women younger than 45 years who underwent breast-conserving surgery (BCS) and radiation therapy (RT) for breast cancer and to discuss implications for practice when caring for young women with the disease.

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**B**reast cancer is a relatively uncommon cancer among women younger than 30 years. The incidence of breast cancer among American women ages 30–34 is about 25 per 100,000 compared with women ages 45–49, in whom the incidence is 200 per 100,000