

Fatigue, Weight Gain, and Altered Sexuality in Patients With Breast Cancer: Exploration of a Symptom Cluster

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Purpose/Objectives: To identify the symptom cluster of fatigue, weight gain, and altered sexuality caused by treatment for breast cancer.

Data Sources: Published research and literature review articles.

Data Synthesis: Fatigue, weight gain, and altered sexuality commonly occur after breast cancer chemotherapy. Each symptom has a significant impact on quality of life; however, viewing them as a symptom cluster magnifies their impact.

Conclusions: These symptoms have yet to be studied as a cluster. Exercise appears to be an intervention common to each that may be effective in reducing the severity of these treatment side effects.

Implications for Nursing: Nurses should view symptoms caused by breast cancer treatment holistically, keeping in mind that a reciprocal relationship often exists among symptoms. Identification of symptom clusters with empirically derived interventions may enhance quality of care and quality of life for patients.

Key Points . . .

- Treatment-induced fatigue is the most pervasive symptom of breast cancer chemotherapy experienced by women.
- Weight gain caused by breast cancer chemotherapy may have implications for morbidity and mortality from breast cancer and other chronic health problems.
- The menopausal side effects of chemotherapy coupled with changes in body appearance have a negative effect on sexuality.
- Exercise may be an intervention that can have a positive effect on this cluster of symptoms.

Breast cancer treatments seldom produce a single symptom as their response. Rather, women respond to cancer therapy with symptoms that occur together in groups or clusters (American Cancer Society, 2003). Fatigue, weight gain, and altered sexuality are frequent side effects of breast cancer treatment (Berger & Walker, 2001; Goodwin, 2001; Nail, 2002; Stead, 2003; Wilmoth & Tingle, 2001). Barton-Burke (1997) postulated a link among fatigue, weight gain, and sexuality caused by cancer treatments (see Figure 1); however, the relationship has not been explored thoroughly.

The concept of symptom clusters has advanced the understanding of synergistic effects of cancer treatment side effects and has the potential to increase efficacy of nursing interventions (Dodd, Janson, et al., 2001). A symptom cluster has been defined as three or more symptoms that are related and experienced concurrently. The treatment side effects all affect a patient at the same time and may even have an interactive effect on each other. The symptoms may not have the same etiology but do have a synergistic effect and may be broad predictors of morbidity (Dodd, Miaskowski, & Paul, 2001). This article will explore the literature on fatigue, weight gain, and altered sexuality as a potential cluster of symptoms that affects women with breast cancer. An understanding of this symptom cluster will aid in directing limited resources toward designing innovative interventions for the more than 2 million breast cancer survivors in the United States (Schnipper, 2003).

Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue (CRF) is “a persistent, subjective sense of tiredness related to cancer or cancer treatment that interferes with usual functioning” (National Comprehensive Cancer Network [NCCN], 2003, p. FT-1). The most common side effect of all cancer treatments, fatigue affects 70%–100% of patients with cancer receiving radiation therapy or chemotherapy (Bower et al., 2000; NCCN). Many patients report that fatigue is more limiting than nausea and vomiting or pain and is not as well controlled (Stone, 2002). Fatigue has been reported to be greater in those recently diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer than those with newly diagnosed breast cancer (Stone, Richards, A'Hern, & Hardy, 2000).

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