

# Strain Among Caregivers of Older Adults Diagnosed With Breast Cancer

Janine Overcash, PhD, CNP-APRN, FAANP, FAAN, Susan Fugett, MSW, LISW-S, OSW-C, CSW-G, Alai Tan, PhD, Jane Ginther, BSN, RN-BC, and Nicole Williams, MD

**OBJECTIVES:** To illustrate the predictors of strain among caregivers of older adults diagnosed with breast cancer.

**SAMPLE & SETTING:** This study involved 39 women diagnosed with breast cancer who were aged 69 years or older, receiving any type of treatment, and seeking an initial assessment in a geriatric oncology program at a large cancer center in the midwestern United States and their caregivers.

**METHODS & VARIABLES:** This cross-sectional study evaluated relationships among the variables of caregiver strain, age, employment status, patient characteristics, and patient scores on the comprehensive geriatric assessment. Bivariate statistics and logistic regression models were used.

**RESULTS:** Increasing age of the caregiver was associated with less caregiver strain. Caregivers employed part-time experienced greater strain than those employed full-time.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING:** Nurses must assess for strain in caregivers of individuals diagnosed with cancer, particularly if they are younger and employed part-time. Caregivers of depressed patients should be assessed for strain and offered support.

**KEYWORDS** caregiver strain; caregiver burden; comprehensive geriatric assessment; cancer

**ONF, 46(6), E185-E201.**

**DOI** 10.1188/19.ONF.E185-E201

About 34 million Americans have provided unpaid caregiver support to an adult aged 50 years or older (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP Public Policy Institute, 2015). Nearly 1 in 10 caregivers in the United States is aged 75 years or older; in addition, caregivers tend to be women and, on average, provide more than 34 hours of care per week for a length of 5.6 years (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP Public Policy Institute, 2015). The average age of a caregiver in the United States is 49.2 years (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP Public Policy Institute, 2015). Individuals aged from 45 to 64 years are most likely to be caregivers and commonly provide companionship, physical care, help with household repairs, and assistance with housework (Stepler, 2015). Caregivers of individuals with cancer are often unpaid and have wide-ranging roles, including the provision of emotional support and daily care, as well as the coordination of cancer care (American Cancer Society, 2016).

Caregivers often experience strain, which refers to the emotional and physical demands associated with providing care, particularly when the needs exceed the resources (Oncology Nursing Society, 2017). Burden is the perception of emotional, physical, social, and financial suffering because of the caregiver role (Zarit, Todd, & Zarit, 1986) and generally affects the mental health of the caregiver of an individual with cancer (Große, Treml, & Kersting, 2018). Strain and burden have similar effects on health, coping, well-being, sleep, social support, and other quality-of-life concerns that affect individuals with cancer and their caregivers (Berglund, Lytsy, & Westerling, 2015; Johansen, Cvancarova, & Ruland, 2018; Litzelman et al., 2015; Yang, Hao, George, & Wang, 2012). Strain can be a force that produces burden (Chen & Hu, 2002; Johansen et al., 2018; Thornton & Travis, 2003). Caregiver burden and strain are terms that describe many similar concepts and are often used together