

QUALITY OF LIFE FOR CANCER PATIENTS DURING AND AFTER CHEMOTHERAPY.

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Abstract: Cancer is a major public health problem in developed and developing countries, deserving increasingly more research in order to promote better quality and humanization of care to patients with this disease. The adverse effects of chemotherapy may be divided into two groups: acute, beginning minutes after administration of antineoplastic agents and persisting for some days, and late, which appear several weeks or months after the infusion thereof. Quality of life means different things to different people. What's most important is that you figure out what it means for you.

Index Terms - Chemotherapy, Quality of Life, Cancer Patients.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a major public health problem in developed and developing countries, deserving increasingly more research in order to promote better quality and humanization of care to patients with this disease. It is estimated that by 2020, the number of new cases per year will be nearly 15 million, of which about 60% occur in developing countries. Because of the increased life expectancy and the aging population, caused by the change in the mortality profile, and reduced rates of communicable diseases, it has been observed that there has been a global increase in the rates of chronic degenerative disease, particularly cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

The cancer diagnosis brings important changes to the way of living with physical and emotional changes due to discomfort, pain, deformity, dependence and loss of self-esteem. It is common to associate the word "cancer" to a life threatening disease and consider it "morally contagious", even avoiding to pronounce its name. In addition, the patient must face the different types of treatment for the disease, such as surgeries and radiotherapy and chemotherapy treatments, frequently associated to adverse side effects.

The adverse effects of chemotherapy may be divided into two groups: acute, beginning minutes after administration of antineoplastic agents and persisting for some days, and late, which appear several weeks or months after the infusion thereof. Most drugs lead to bone marrow depression in varying degrees, depending on the agent and dose used, as well as intrinsic factors. Alopecia and gastrointestinal changes are also frequent. Even when one reaches the end of a successful treatment, the patient still has to live with the fear of recurrence and the consequences that arise from a cancer treatment. Moreover, this whole routine of chemotherapy and radiotherapy to "take care of cancer" can change dramatically the patients' everyday life, interfering with their quality of life.

There is wide range of concepts and opinions about "quality of life" and, over time, these concepts have been turning to the patient's perception about the disease and treatment and its effects, in an objective and subjective way. Health and disease represent processes included as a continuum, related to economic, socio-cultural, personal experience and life style aspects. Thus, improving quality of life has become one of the outcomes expected both of care practices and public policies for the sector in the fields of health promotion and disease prevention.

QUALITY OF LIFE:

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines quality of life as "the individual's perception of his or her position in life in the context of culture and value systems in which he or she lives, and in relation to personal goals, expectations, standards and concerns. The best understanding of the elements making up this perception can help the health professional to define interventions that envisage patient's integrality, rather than being restricted to addressing the disease and treatment. Thus, this

study sought to evaluate the quality of life of cancer patients during chemotherapy, seeking support for a more comprehensive and human care. This study is relevant given the increased incidence of cancer in Brazil and how this disease affects the daily lives of patients.

Quality of life means different things to different people. What's most important is that you figure out what it means for you.

Having a potentially life-threatening disease like cancer often leads people to examine their lives and look for meaning. In fact, this search for meaning may be the aspect of cancer that most often has a positive influence on life. The fear of death that affects most people when they are diagnosed with cancer, often leads us to think about what we leave behind and what we would like to do with the time we have left. It can make you feel like it's the quality of life, not just the quantity, which matters most.

MANAGING PAIN

Treatment for cancer—surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy and targeted therapies—can cause pain and discomfort. Because cancer can also cause pain, the pain can be distressing, raising concerns about recurrence. That's why relief for pain can include addressing your fears as well.

Pain can live the life as fully as possible. Yet studies show that pain among cancer survivors is not often reported, recognized, or treated well. The patients do not have to suffer in silence. In most cases, treatment can help.

If the patient experiencing new pain or severe pain, it is important that to inform the doctor immediately. The doctor may ask questions about how often pain have and how much the pain hurts. Using a Pain Rating Scale will help the doctor better understand the pain and provide an appropriate course of treatment.

PAIN MANAGEMENT TIPS

- ♣ Keep track of when the patient has pain and how much pain the patient have.
- ♣ This will help the patient accurately describe it to the doctor. The patient can also write down additional information such as:
 - ✓ Where it hurts: What are the exact places? Does the pain stay there or radiate out?
 - ✓ Was the onset sudden or gradual: Is the pain constant or does it come and go?
 - ✓ How does it affect your life? Does it interfere with your usual activities such as, working; household chores; exercise; eating; socializing with family and friends?
- ♣ Relief of pain may involve one or more of the following:
 - ✓ Complementary medicine such as meditation and acupuncture
 - ✓ Exercise
 - ✓ Massage therapy
 - ✓ Physical or occupational therapy
 - ✓ Prescription or non-prescription drugs (Fewer than 1% of cancer patients on pain medication become addicted)
 - ✓ Surgery or nerve blocks
 - ✓ Yoga

LYMPHEDEMA AND NERVE DAMAGE

LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is pain and swelling that develops in the arms, legs or trunk due to a build-up of lymph fluid. Lymphedema stops the lymph fluid—which carries cells that help fight infections and other diseases—from flowing freely in your body. Watch for even a slight increase in size or swelling of the arm, hand, fingers, chest wall, trunk or legs. Contact your doctor if you notice these symptoms.

The risk of developing lymphedema if patient had any of the following procedures:

- Biopsy
- Lumpectomy or mastectomy

- Surgery that disrupts lymph flow in the groin or axilla (armpit); these may include surgeries for prostate and gynecological cancers and melanoma
- Sentinel lymph node mapping procedures (use of dyes and radioactive substances to identify lymph nodes that contain tumor cells)

OTHER RISK FACTORS INCLUDE:

- Being seriously overweight
- Having diabetes
- Taking certain medications, such as steroids

STRATEGIES TO LOWER YOUR RISK OF LYMPHEDEMA INCLUDE

- ☞ When possible, avoid injections, finger sticks, blood pressure checks, or blood draws in the “at risk” arm.
- ☞ Keep the skin of the “at risk” limb clean and gently moisturized
- ☞ Make sure the “at risk” arm or leg gets proper circulation
- ☞ Lift the arm above the heart occasionally
- ☞ Select a light weight prosthetic, if required
- ☞ Wear only loose fitting clothing and jewelry around the affected area
- ☞ Avoid heavy lifting, rigorous movements or excessive pressure on the affected limb.
- ☞ Establish a safe exercise program (if there is discomfort, elevate the affected limb).
- ☞ Avoid extreme temperature changes (saunas, hot tubs...)
- ☞ Minimize the chances of injury and infection (bruises, cuts, insect bites, scratches...) to the affected limb.
- ☞ Take special precautions when travelling—ask for guidance from a lymphedema specialist.

NERVE DAMAGE (NEUROPATHY)

Nerve damage from treatment—also called neuropathy—can cause odd sensations such as tingling or numbness in your hands, arms, feet, or legs. This type of damage raises your risk for burns and falls. For example, if your sense of touch is impaired, you can scald your skin in the shower without realizing it, and if your legs are numb, you are more likely to stumble.

If nerve damage is a problem for you, there are practical steps you can take to make your environment safer:

- ❖ Check water temperature
- ❖ Be sure to use gloves and potholders
- ❖ Keep rooms, outside paths and stairs well lit
- ❖ Clear walkways and floors
- ❖ Use non-skid mats in showers and bathtubs
- ❖ Ask your doctor or nurse what actions make sense for you, at home and at work.

COGNITIVE PROBLEMS: CHEMO-BRAIN

Cognitive changes are problems with thinking, including memory, concentration and behavior. These can be caused by cancer and its treatments as well as other medicines or health problems.

Cognitive difficulties can affect your ability to work or complete everyday tasks. It can be very upsetting to realize that your cancer has been successfully treated, but that due to the treatments that treated it you now have problems with your thinking, memory, or concentration.

Not everyone who has chemotherapy, radiation or surgery develops cognitive difficulties. Even so, you should know what to look for.

CHEMO-BRAIN

Chemo-brain is a term cancer survivors who received chemotherapy coined to describe the changes in their ability to remember or concentrate. Symptoms of chemo-brain may include

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty remembering things that occurred recently
- Difficulty completing tasks

- Confusion
- Inability to think clearly

Whether cognitive changes will improve or be permanent depends on their cause.

- ✓ **Acute Cognitive Changes** (delirium) that occur because of certain medicines often improve when you stop taking the medicine.
- ✓ **Chronic Changes** (dementia) are often not reversible, but may be improved if the cause of the problems can be corrected.

If you notice changes in your thinking, memory or behaviour, keep a record of the problems that you have and ask your family or friends to watch for additional problems. Make an appointment to talk to your health care team about these symptoms as soon as possible. Treating the underlying condition often reduces or removes cognitive problems.

SEXUAL INTIMACY

When cancer interferes with sex, it can create a lot of distress. Despite the many types of cancer and cancer treatments, most sexual problems after cancer fall into the following categories:

- Loss of sexual desire in men and women
- Trouble getting and keeping an erection for men
- Having pain with genital caressing or vaginal penetration for women

TEN SUGGESTIONS TO HELP YOU REGAIN YOUR DESIRE FOR SEX AFTER CANCER:

1. If healthy exercise and nutrition help you feel less tired and reduce physical pain, they will also give you more energy to be in the mood for sex.
2. If you think that you are depressed, see if short-term, specific counseling can help lighten your mood. People who are depressed often lose interest in sex. Although antidepressants can help your mood, and may be important for more serious depression, they can interfere with sexual desire and make it hard to reach orgasm (especially for women). If you can benefit from counseling and avoid medication, it would be ideal.
3. Discuss with your doctor if the medication you take could decrease your desire for sex. You may be able to try a different version or lower your dose.
4. If you are feeling unattractive, consider what you can do to feel better about your body and your looks. Pamper yourself with a bubble bath or a massage. Find some sexy lingerie to cover a surgical scar during lovemaking, or wear a nice scent. Try to lose some post-chemo weight by exercising and improving your diet. You do not have to work hard to feel sensual.
5. Many men and women find they have distracting thoughts about cancer during sex that interfere with being able to relax and enjoy good physical feelings. You can try giving yourself the luxury of just focusing on your own sensations during lovemaking. Another way to let go of anxious thoughts about cancer, is to practice focusing on a detailed sexual fantasy. You don't have to imagine sex with a movie star (although you can...) you can remember a time when sex with your partner was especially exciting or romantic.
6. If you feel comfortable with self-touch or masturbation, take some time to relax in private, perhaps after a bath or shower. It may take some patience and practice to feel sexual pleasure again.
7. If you are a man with an erection problem, see an urologist to explore medical treatment: pills, penile injections, or even surgery to have a penile prosthesis. For men, being able to have firm erections can be the biggest boost to interest in sex.
8. If you are a woman who is having pain during sexual touching or intercourse, it is crucial to get some help. A first step is usually to use a vaginal moisturizer regularly and use lots of thin, water- or silicone-based vaginal lubricant when you have sex. If your pain persists, see your gynecologist for help.
9. If the problem with desire is focused on a loss of attraction between you and your partner, couples or individual counseling can help pinpoint what is going on.
10. Not all doctors have experience with sexual intimacy. You may want to ask your doctor for a referral to a medical gynaecologist with expertise in treating women who have had cancer or a urologist who specializes in helping men with erection problems.

TEN ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE**1. Take one day and make one decision at a time.**

Try to focus on resolving only today's problems. Avoid projecting worst-case scenarios for the future. Taking one small step at a time can help you feel less vulnerable and give you a greater level of control.

2. Ask for support.

Be open with your family and friends about how you feel and how they can support you. Offer specific examples, such as: going with you for a walk or just listening when you want to talk.

3. Communicate with your health care team.

If you are experiencing short- or long-term or late side effects let them know. Don't suffer in silence. There are things they can do to help mitigate many of the problems you are experiencing.

4. Retain as much control of your life as is reasonable.

Having had cancer can make it difficult for you to feel in charge of your life. Take steps to take back some of the activities or decisions you may have delegated to others while you were undergoing treatment.

5. Acknowledge and express your feelings.

A diagnosis of cancer can trigger many strong emotions. Take time to listen to yourself. Find constructive ways to express your feelings through writing, talking, physical activity or creative pursuits. Consider professional support if you feel that depression or anxiety is hampering your ability to function well.

6. Seek support from other cancer survivors.

Often, people find a sense of comfort when they communicate with others affected by cancer. Ask your doctor, nurse, or social worker for local support groups. You can also contact the Cancer Support Community for ways to connect one-on-one, in groups, or online with others.

7. Learn relaxation techniques.

"Relaxation" refers to a calm, controlled physical state that will enhance your wellbeing. Relaxation is something that you might have to learn to put into your day, but it is important to do so. Consider music that makes you happy, reading a book, or taking a walk. Yoga, tai-chi, or meditation programs are also helpful. Take time to enjoy the moment.

8. Do what you enjoy.

Try to find humor in the unexpected moments of each day. Consider activities that you enjoy and can do comfortably. If you need to spend time alone, allow yourself that.

9. Make healthy lifestyle choices.

It's never too late to make changes that will improve your wellbeing. Improving your diet, including exercise in your routine, and maintaining intimacy are all ways of feeling better both physically and emotionally.

10. Maintain a spirit of hope.

Hope is desirable and reasonable. It can be scary after cancer to set goals, but start out small and enjoy daily pleasures. You may want to redefine how and when you experience hope by focusing on your spiritual beliefs, cultural customs, and family connections.

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