

# Women's Experiences With Antiestrogen Therapy to Treat Breast Cancer

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An estimated 230,480 new cases of invasive breast cancer and 57,650 new cases of noninvasive breast cancer were diagnosed in American women in 2011 (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2011). More than 11.9 million cancer survivors are estimated to be living in the United States (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2011a) and, of those, about 2.6 million are women living with a diagnosis of breast cancer (ACS, 2011). Women with breast cancer make up the largest percentage of survivors that are five years post-treatment (NCI, 2011a). The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), Institute of Medicine (IOM) (Hewitt, Greenfield, & Stovall, 2006), NCI (2011b), and the Oncology Nursing Society (2009) have identified interventions aimed at improving cancer survivorship as essential to patient care and research. A first step in addressing the survivorship care of women on antiestrogen therapy (AET) is to understand the experience from the perspective of these women.

Curative treatment for early-stage breast cancer involves a triad of possible treatment modalities that occur over a one-year period, including surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy with various agents, which requires women to have frequent visits and interactions with the oncology team for management of symptoms and side effects. At the end of the treatment phase, women with estrogen-receptor-positive cancers are prescribed and expected to initiate oral AET to further reduce the risk of cancer recurrence. More than 80% of breast cancers in women older than 45 years are found to be of the estrogen-receptor-positive type (Glass, Lacey, Carreon, & Hoover, 2007). For AET to be successful, women must adhere to treatment for five to 10 years, often despite distressing side effects and during which time less contact is made with the healthcare team (Winters, Habin, & Gallagher, 2007).

Notwithstanding the evidence from clinical trials suggesting distressing side effects and decreased

**Purpose/Objectives:** To understand the experiences of women undergoing antiestrogen therapy (AET) to treat breast cancer.

**Research Approach:** Content analysis of tape-recorded focus group interviews.

**Setting:** Breast oncology center of a large medical center in the northeastern United States.

**Participants:** Purposive sample of 21 women undergoing AET to treat breast cancer.

**Methodologic Approach:** A nonexperimental qualitative, descriptive design using open-ended interviews and content analysis to isolate themes.

**Main Research Variables:** Women's experiences with AET.

**Findings:** Five themes were isolated and were focused on the overall experience of having breast cancer: symptoms related to AET, shared decision making, being strong for others, discovering new priorities, and recognizing vulnerability.

**Conclusions:** Oral therapies are an increasingly popular treatment option for various types of cancer, particularly in women with estrogen-sensitive breast cancer. Although this type of treatment has been efficacious in terms of disease-free and overall survival, women undergoing AET face many challenges related to treatment. Healthcare providers need to understand women's perceptions of AET and its effects as a first step in the process of developing interventions to improve care.

**Interpretation:** More research is needed to distinguish whether the presence of preexisting chronic illness, differences in type of AET, age, and ethnicity impact the overall experience of women on AET. Individual interviews may be necessary to fully explore the experience. Oncology nurses should implement surveillance care to explore the effects of AET on women with breast cancer.

adherence over time, a gap exists in knowledge from a nursing perspective focused on describing the experience of women on AET. The current study aims to address that gap in knowledge by exploring women's experience of AET.