Cancer of the prostate is the most common form of cancer among men over 55 years of age (Jemal, Thomas, Murray, & Thun, 2002). Because of the inherent nature of the illness, cancer of the prostate frequently affects the self-esteem and sexual function of men. Treatment side effects, including urinary incontinence, erectile dysfunction, loss of libido, and fatigue, affect not only the patient but also his spouse. These symptoms can drastically alter the established role of each member of the husband-wife dyad, resulting in feelings of frustration and stress. Changes in the marital relationship can further affect the quality of life of the couple. How couples live with a diagnosis of prostate cancer and manage treatment effects is not well defined in the literature. The specific aims of this study were to explore (a) the experiences of couples living with prostate cancer, (b) the impact of the illness on their quality of life, (c) their ability to manage symptoms, and (d) their ideas for interventions that would help them improve their daily experiences. As healthcare professionals gain a better understanding of couples’ experiences, they will be able to design programs of care to meet the physical and emotional needs of men and their spouses.

Purpose/Objectives: To explore the experiences of couples living with prostate cancer, the impact of the illness on their quality of life, their ability to manage symptoms, and their suggestions for interventions that would help them to improve their daily experiences.

Design: Descriptive, qualitative.

Setting: Six focus groups were used to obtain the data: two were patient-only groups, two were spouse-caregiver groups, and two were dyad groups. The focus groups were conducted at two comprehensive cancer centers in the midwestern region of the United States.

Sample: 42 participants: 22 men with prostate cancer and 20 spouse-caregivers.

Methods: Focus group discussions were tape-recorded, and the content was analyzed.

Main Research Variables: Quality of life, symptom experiences, and areas for intervention.

Findings: Four major themes emerged from the data: enduring uncertainty, living with treatment effects, coping with changes, and needing help.

Conclusions: Participants had a need for information and support. Both men and spouse-caregivers felt unprepared to manage treatment effects. Symptoms had a broad effect on couples, not just men. Positive effects of the illness, as well as negative effects, emerged from the themes.

Implications for Nursing: Attention needs to be given to methods of providing information and support to couples coping with prostate cancer. Both patients and partners need to be included in discussions about the effect of the illness and treatments so that both can feel more prepared to manage them.

Key Points . . .

➤ Prostate cancer creates a great deal of uncertainty in the lives of men and their spouses.

➤ Both patients and spouses want information about treatment effects, particularly incontinence, hormone alterations, fatigue, and sexual difficulties, and ways to manage them.

➤ Spouses play a major role in helping men manage the illness and need to be included in programs of care.

➤ Patients and spouses need the opportunity to voice their concerns and receive support from healthcare professionals caring for them.

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