

Antecedents and Outcomes of Uncertainty in Older Adults With Cancer: A Scoping Review of the Literature

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Problem Identification: Uncertainty is a major source of distress for cancer survivors. Because cancer is primarily a disease of older adults, a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of uncertainty in older adults with cancer is essential.

Literature Search: MEDLINE[®], PsycINFO[®], Scopus, and CINAHL[®] were searched from inception to December 2015. Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free text words were used for the search concepts, including *neoplasms*, *uncertainty*, and *aging*.

Data Evaluation: Extracted data included research aims; research design or analysis approach; sample size; mean age; type, stage, and duration of cancer; type and duration of treatment; uncertainty scale; and major results.

Synthesis: Of 2,584 articles initially identified, 44 studies (30 qualitative, 12 quantitative, and 2 mixed-methods) were included. Evidence tables were developed to organize quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive numeric and thematic analyses were used to analyze quantitative results and qualitative findings, respectively. Outcomes were reported under four main categories: antecedents of uncertainty, outcomes of uncertainty, management of uncertainty, and the experience of uncertainty.

Conclusions: Uncertainty is an enduring and common experience in cancer survivorship. Uncertainty is affected by a number of demographic and clinical factors and affects quality of life (QOL) and psychological well-being.

Implications for Practice: Uncertainty should be considered a contributing factor to psychological well-being and QOL in older adults with cancer. Nurses are in a unique position to assess negative effects of uncertainty and manage these consequences by providing patients with information and emotional support.

Uncertainty is defined as a “period of anticipation prior to confrontation with a potentially harmful event” (Monat, Averill, & Lazarus, 1972, p. 237) and is a common experience in cancer (Applebaum et al., 2014; Gil et al., 2006; Maher & De Vries, 2011). The unknown etiology and unpredictable future of cancer can prompt a sense of sustained uncertainty lingering throughout the cancer journey (Mishel, 1981; Wright, Afari, & Zautra, 2009). Lack of ability to define and classify illness-related events (Mishel, 1988) and predict treatment outcomes can provoke an apprehensive feeling of uncertainty (Penrod, 2001) that can adversely affect patients’ psychosocial well-being (Ferrans, 1994; Gotay & Muraoka, 1998; Henderson, 1997). The cancer survivorship literature frequently locates uncertainty within the stress and coping model and suggests that uncertainty surrounding cancer can impair coping and adaptation through intensifying negative effects of stress and paralyzing anticipatory coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mishel, Hostetter, King, & Graham, 1984; Wonghongkul, Moore, Musil, Schneider, & Deimling, 2000). Higher levels of uncertainty have been shown to be associated with poorer quality of life (QOL), greater levels of emotional distress, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and