Cancer worry in women who are at hereditary risk for breast cancer is a phenomenon receiving heightened scrutiny in the cancer literature, particularly in studies of hereditary cancer predisposition. Predominant risk factors for hereditary cancer predisposition include a strong family history of one type of cancer or constellation of cancers that are signals for certain hereditary syndromes. In these syndromes, cancers usually present in two or more first-degree relatives (e.g., parent, sibling, child) or in one first-degree and two or more second-degree relatives (e.g., grandparent, aunt or uncle, niece or nephew), resulting in a pattern of cancer in the family that often spans several generations. Such cancers also may be diagnosed at younger ages than their sporadic counterparts (Lynch & Lynch, 1991). Thus, people at inherited risk for cancer predisposition may worry about not only whether they will get cancer, but when cancer will occur, thereby providing one explanation for why study of cancer worry is gaining importance.

Cancer worry in individuals at risk for hereditary breast cancer ostensibly affects risk perception, risk-reduction behaviors, and well-being. However, associations of cancer worry with these constructs are not straightforward. For example, some studies reported a positive relationship between breast cancer-specific worry and perceived risk of cancer (Bish et al., 2002; Brain, Norman, Gray, & Mansel, 1999; Easterling & Leventhal, 1989; Hopwood et al., 1998; Lloyd et al., 1996), whereas others showed no relationship (Audrain et al., 1997). Likewise, moderate to high levels of worry motivated specific risk-reduction behaviors in high-risk groups (Audrain et al.; Diefenbach, Miller, & Daly, 1999; McCaul, Branstetter, O’Donnell, Jacobsen, & Quinlan, 1998) or inhibited those behaviors (Kash, Holland, Halper, & Miller, 1992; Kash, Holland, Osborne, & Miller, 1995; Lerman et al., 1993). High levels of worry also influenced participation in risk-assessment or cancer-prevention clinical trials (Audrain et al.; Bowen et al., 1999; Brain et al., 2001; Lerman, Rimer, Inc., Research Fellowship. This article received the 2003 Oncology Nursing Society Excellence in Cancer Nursing Research Award, supported by Schering Oncology/Biotech. (Mention of specific products and opinions related to those products do not indicate or imply endorsement by the Oncology Nursing Forum or the Oncology Nursing Society.)