Opioids and Cancer Survivors: Issues in Side-Effect Management

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Key Points . . .
➤ Opioid analgesics for treatment of moderate to severe pain in patients with cancer are an essential part of pain management.
➤ The use of opioids often is associated with side effects, including sedation, constipation, nausea and vomiting, and cognitive impairment.
➤ The late and long-term effects on survivors who require pain treatment are poorly understood and underinvestigated.
➤ Oncology nurses can take the lead in addressing these issues by conducting comprehensive pain and symptom assessments of cancer survivors who are at increased risk for long-term and late effects from cancer and its treatment, including pain.

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Tremendous progress has been made in cancer pain management. American society has witnessed the widespread use of consensus guidelines and standards (American Pain Society, 2003; Gordon, Dahl, Miaskowski, et al., 2005; Jacox, Carr, & Payne, 1994; Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, 2006; National Comprehensive Cancer Network, 2008), a growing understanding of the role of genetics in pain management (Branford, Pantelidis, & Ross, 2008; Reyes-Gibby et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2008), and advances in the development of new delivery systems for pain medications (Gordon, 2007). Extensive public and patient media campaigns have taught adults and children with cancer how to communicate the severity of their pain using a simple numeric scale. Proactive community and grassroots groups continue to advocate for changes in policies regarding the prescribing of and access to opioid analgesics.

Equally important is the growing number of cancer survivors (Ferrell, Virani, Smith, & Juarez, 2003; Hewitt, Greenfield, Stovall, National Cancer Policy Board, & Committee on Cancer Survivorship Improving Care and Quality of Life, 2006). Clinicians who treat cancer survivors know that cancer and its treatment produce many late and long-term effects. One area of concern is the chronic pain many survivors continue to experience as a residual effect of treatment or from a combination of other chronic pain conditions. The late and long-term effects on survivors who require pain treatment are poorly understood and underinvestigated. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of issues associated with the long-term use of opioids in cancer survivors with cancer-related pain.

Numerous and complex factors contribute to the undertreatment of cancer pain, including a lack of knowledge about or negative attitudes toward opioid analgesics on the part of patients, their families, and healthcare providers; providers’ reluctance to use or prescribe opioid analgesics; and restricted...