Prevalence and Correlates of Depression Among Patients With Head and Neck Cancer: A Systematic Review of Implications for Research

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Head and neck cancer is a collective term defined on an anatomic-topographic basis to describe malignant tumors of the upper aerodigestive tract. Cancers of the head and neck include lip, oral cavity, pharynx, nasal cavity, paranasal sinuses, larynx, thyroid gland, and salivary gland. Worldwide, head and neck cancer is the eighth most common cause of cancer death (Choong & Vokes, 2008). In North America and Europe, head and neck cancer accounts for 3%–4% of all cancer diagnoses (Ferlay et al., 2007; Jemal et al., 2007). More than 90% of head and neck cancers are squamous cell carcinoma in origin and about 50% occur in the oral cavity (Carr, 2005). Epidemiologic and molecular studies have identified high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV) in patients with no common risk factors for head and neck cancer (Haddad, 2007), which suggests HPV is a new etiologic factor in squamous cell carcinoma. HPV-related head and neck cancers are associated with a higher proportion of men, younger age groups, and a more advanced stage at initial presentation (Haddad).

Head and neck cancer is a complex and distressing disease with high mortality and morbidity because of disease and treatment factors that affect vital function, such as eating, breathing, and communicating. Depression often is present for patients with head and neck cancer throughout the course of their cancer experience.

Researchers to date have examined depression in clinical populations at different points in the cancer trajectory but have not specifically focused on head and neck cancer. However, they have studied depression related to cancer from a variety of anatomic sites and used different instruments to measure depression. The purpose of this systematic review is to present a comprehensive summary of existing research literature related to the prevalence and correlates of depression in adult patients with head and neck cancer to establish a knowledge base for future research.