Patients with cancer can experience a variety of symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, nausea, dyspnea, and sleep disturbances. Although several symptoms often occur in conjunction, research traditionally has focused on single symptoms. In 2004, Miaskowski, Dodd, and Lee argued that the new frontier of symptom research is the study of symptom clusters. A symptom cluster was defined by Dodd, Miaskowski, and Paul (2001) as three or more concurrent symptoms that are interrelated, although Kim, McGuire, Tulman, and Barsevick (2005) argued that two or more symptoms are sufficient to constitute a cluster if other criteria are met. The criteria involve the cluster symptoms occurring together in stable combinations relatively independently of other symptom constellations and that relationships among symptoms within a cluster should be stronger than with symptoms outside the cluster (Kim et al.).

In perusing the literature, the authors of this article found two main approaches used to determine the existence of symptom clusters. One approach is to inductively determine the cluster empirically; another is to investigate the existence of a predetermined symptom cluster formulated on the basis of previous research or clinical experience (Miaskowski, Aouizerat, Dodd, & Cooper, 2007). Fan, Filipczak, and Chow (2007) conducted a literature review of empirically derived symptom clusters commonly occurring in patients with cancer. After reviewing 13 studies, only one cluster, consisting of gastrointestinal symptoms, occurred consistently (in six of seven studies of patients with heterogeneous cancers), and no consistent symptom clusters were found in patients with lung or breast cancer (Fan et al.). On the other hand, when Barsevick (2007) examined scientific literature for occurrence of a predetermined cluster of fatigue, insomnia, pain, and depression in patients with cancer, she found that, regardless of method, various combinations of these symptoms formed a cluster.

This lack of consistency in the literature may not only be related to whether symptom clusters are predefined or empirically determined, but also to differences in...