Patients with cancer experience a variety of symptoms as a result of their disease and treatment. Management of multiple symptoms has been a priority of symptom research for a number of years and remains an important topic (Oncology Nursing Society, 2005). Studies about multiple symptoms in women with gynecologic cancers are limited compared to common cancers such as breast or lung (Ahlberg, Ekman, & Gaston-Johansson, 2005; Donovan & Ward, 2005). Importantly, most women with ovarian or uterine cancers experience severe symptoms because of advanced disease and aggressive treatment (Rubin, 2001); therefore, a need exists to study symptoms in women with gynecologic cancers.

Background and Significance

Gynecologic cancers include several types. Ovarian cancer, the ninth most common cancer in women, is the fifth leading cause of gynecologic cancer deaths in women in the United States (American Cancer Society, 2009). Women with ovarian cancer experience severe symptoms over time because of the advanced stage of disease at diagnosis and treatments. Treatment of ovarian cancer involves radical abdominal and pelvic surgery and debulking, typically followed by combination treatment with chemotherapy drugs for five to six months that can cause neuropathy and other unpleasant and debilitating symptoms (Martin, 2007). Despite treatment, women with ovarian cancer often decline and suffer physically. Psychological-related symptoms also occur because of an uncertain prognosis and decreased quality of life (QOL) (Rubin, 2001; Salzberg et al., 2005). For uterine cancer, adjuvant pelvic radiotherapy after radical surgery causes various side effects (mainly gastrointestinal), including fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and lack of appetite (Caffo et al., 2003). Available descriptions of symptom experiences are limited in women with uterine cancer and other gynecologic cancers after surgery (Ahlberg et al., 2005; Donovan & Ward, 2005). Symptoms after surgery in women with gynecologic cancers, particularly ovarian cancer, are poorly understood.