The concept of symptom burden commonly is used in medical and psychological literature, especially in reference to patients with chronic or terminal illnesses (Desbiens, Mueller-Rizner, Connors, Wenger, & Lynn, 1999; Klinkenberg, Willems, van der Wal, & Deeg, 2004; Kutner, Kasser, & Nowels, 2001; Nelson et al., 2004; Rose, Koshman, Spreng, & Sheldon, 2000; Ruo et al., 2003; Silveira, Kabeto, & Langa, 2005; Walke, Gallo, Tinetti, & Fried, 2004; Weisbord et al., 2003). Few research investigations concerning symptom burden have appeared in the nursing literature (Longman, Braden, & Mishel, 1997; Zambroski, Moser, Bhat, & Ziegler, 2005); however, multiple related concepts, such as symptom distress, commonly are explored (McCormick, Naimark, & Tate, 2002; Schneider, 1999). The recent concept analyses of symptom clusters (Kim, McGuire, Tulman, & Barsevick, 2005) and symptoms experience (Armstrong, 2003) bring into question inter-relationships among various symptom concepts, including symptom burden. A clear definitional concept of symptom burden is required for continued advancement of scientific knowledge about the symptom experience (Beck, 2004).

Several self-report instruments are available that measure particular concepts in the symptom experience, including symptom burden and symptom distress (Barresi, Shadbolt, Byrne, & Stuart-Harris, 2003; Chiou, 1998; Cleeland et al., 2000; Cooley, 2000; de Haes, van Knippenberg, & Neijt, 1990; McCorkle & Young, 1978; Portenoy, Thaler, Kornblith, Lepore, Friedlander-Klar, Kiyasu, et al., 1994). The instruments are used in multiple disease states, including cancer. Medical and nursing researchers often use the same symptom identification instruments, with portions of the tools excluded, depending on the symptom concept being measured. Given the inconsistencies, a specific definition of symptom burden clearly is required for continued advancement of scientific knowledge about the symptom experience.

Methods

Rodgers’ (2000) evolutionary method of concept analysis allows for a dynamic reality with overlapping and interrelated elements in a multitude of contexts and disciplines. The technique requires a multidisciplinary literature review to identify attributes, antecedents, surrogate and related concepts, consequences, and contextual variations of the concept. This literature analysis will address the following questions.

Key Points . . .

➤ Patients with cancer experience multiple symptoms related to the disease and its treatment.
➤ Identifying key concepts in symptom experiences guides measurement and methodologies for nursing research.
➤ Symptom burden is a distinct concept in symptom experience that contributes to the understanding of patients’ physiologic and psychological functioning during the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.
➤ Oncology nurses must understand symptom concepts and appropriate assessment of multiple symptoms in the illness trajectory to select management strategies that positively affect patient outcomes.