

Illness Uncertainty and Its Antecedents for Patients With Prostate Cancer and Their Partners

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OBJECTIVES: Guided by Mishel's uncertainty in illness theory, patterns of change in uncertainty were explored over time for patients with prostate cancer and their partners. In addition, the relationships between uncertainty and its antecedents were examined, and the role effects (patient versus partner) on these relationships were assessed.

SAMPLE & SETTING: This study is a secondary analysis of the longitudinal data collected from a randomized clinical trial.

METHODS & VARIABLES: The current authors fitted multiple-level models that included time-invariant baseline variables (sociodemographics and cancer factors) and time-varying variables (uncertainty, symptoms, and social support) measured at baseline and at 4, 8, and 12 months thereafter.

RESULTS: No statistically significant patterns of change in uncertainty over time were detected. Partners reported greater uncertainty than patients. Higher uncertainty was associated with more general and prostate cancer-specific symptoms, recurrent and advanced prostate cancer, higher prostate-specific antigen level, and lower social support. More urinary symptoms were associated with greater uncertainty in patients than in partners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING: Uncertainty management can be tailored for and target symptom management and social support.

KEYWORDS illness uncertainty; prostate cancer; symptom management; social support

ONF, 47(6), 721-731.

DOI 10.1188/20.ONF.721-731

Despite the encouraging average five-year survival rate, patients with prostate cancer can experience illness uncertainty related to treatment decision making and to the meaning and management of symptoms (e.g., sexual dysfunction) attributable to their prostate cancer and treatment exposures (Yu Ko & Degner, 2008). Illness uncertainty is defined as the inability to determine the meaning of illness-related events (Mishel et al., 2002). Illness uncertainty is a cognitive state that occurs when illness-related events are inconsistent with patient expectations, occur unpredictably, or have unclear causes, triggers, or patterns (Mishel, 1988). Illness uncertainty can negatively affect psychological adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2015), quality of life (Parker et al., 2016), and satisfaction with treatment outcomes for people who are ill (Kazer et al., 2013).

Changes over time regarding illness uncertainty can be expected as patients with prostate cancer move from diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment recovery to long-term survivorship, when they experience lingering or worsening symptoms and functional impairments. In addition, for patients with prostate cancer in an intimate relationship, symptoms and functional impairments, such as fatigue and sexual dysfunction, also affect their partner's psychological state and quality of life (Lehto et al., 2018). However, to the current authors' knowledge, no published study has used longitudinal data to examine how illness uncertainty changes over time for patients diagnosed with prostate cancer and their partners as they move through the cancer trajectory. The purpose of this study was to examine the patterns of change over time in illness uncertainty for patients with prostate cancer and their partners, as well as to verify relationships between uncertainty and its antecedents, as suggested by Mishel's (1988) uncertainty in