Among women worldwide, the two most common types of cancer are cancers of the breast and cervix (World Health Organization, 2015). In young women, breast cancer tends to be sinister, has a less than favorable prognosis, and requires more aggressive treatment (Anders et al., 2008; Lee & Han, 2014). Despite organized cervical cancer screening programs and the introduction of vaccines to prevent strains of cancer-causing human papillomavirus, invasive cervical cancer requiring aggressive treatment is prevalent among younger and older women (Spayne et al., 2008).

Being told that one has cancer produces psychological distress (Carlson, Groff, Maciejewski, & Bultz, 2010; Stadelmaier, Duguey-Cachet, Saada, & Quintard, 2014). Young women experiencing breast or gynecologic cancers are at a higher risk for psychological distress than older women (Gómez-Campelo, Bragado-Álvarez, & Hernández-Lloreda, 2014), particularly during the phases of diagnosis and treatment (Manuel et al., 2007). Many young women diagnosed with cancer are mothers, but little is known about how they manage their maternal roles and responsibilities during each phase of the cancer journey.

Background

A cancer diagnosis triggers fears of death. For many young women, cancer forces them to face their mortality for the first time. After this initial fear, they face threats to their femininity, including concerns about body image and sexual functioning (Ussher, Perz, & Gilbert, 2012). Systemic treatment can affect young women’s sexual well-being and overall quality of life because it can induce premature and sudden menopause with symptoms of hot flashes, reduced libido, vaginal and vulvar dryness, and atrophy (Baucom, Porter, Kirby, Gremore, & Keefe, 2005; Katz, 2007). Young women’s reproductive-related concerns are diverse. They include fertility, missed opportunities for childbearing, the safety of contraception, whether to pursue pregnancy after breast cancer, their ability to breastfeed (Connell, Patterson, & Newman, 2006; Corney & Swinglehurst, 2014; Lambertini, Pinto, & Del Mastro, 2014), and the possibility of cancer recurrence (Thewes et al., 2013).

Treatment for breast cancer includes surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy (used alone or in combination), as well as other modalities, such as endocrine...