

Sexual Health: Exploring Patient Needs and Healthcare Provider Comfort and Knowledge

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Background: Sexual health is an important quality-of-life issue for many cancer survivors; however, this issue remains inadequately discussed by healthcare providers (HCPs) and patients.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to explore whether clinical oncology HCPs have adequate knowledge and are comfortable addressing sexual health issues, and to explore and describe patients' attitudes, beliefs, and informational needs regarding sexual health.

Methods: A survey was completed by HCPs and three patient focus groups were conducted to learn more about sexual health. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative responses were analyzed using content analysis.

Findings: The majority of survey respondents reported on the importance of discussing sexual concerns with patients, lacked sexual health training, and were uncomfortable discussing sexual health with patients. Focus group participants wanted access to timely information during treatment, online educational resources, and brochures and handouts; involvement of significant others; support from providers, peers, and survivors; and expert consultation.

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Many survivors experience physiological and/or psychological problems related to sexual health, including relationship changes, loss of libido, erectile dysfunction, and vaginal dryness (American Cancer Society, 2014). Particular chemotherapy regimens and radiation therapy often cause long-term sexual changes in men and women. Of these sexual changes, 30%–100% result in difficulties, depending on the cancer type and treatment (Galbraith, Fink, & Wilkins, 2011). Sexuality is important to people; however, sexual health concerns are frequently underassessed, underdiagnosed, underreported, and undertreated because of a variety of barriers, such as lack of healthcare provider (HCP) information and knowledge (Krebs, 2010; Sporn et al., 2014).

All components of the healthcare system should recognize psychosocial needs as an integral part of quality cancer care;

sexual health issues are of considerable concern to cancer survivors (Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2008, 2013; National Comprehensive Cancer Network [NCCN], 2015). The NCCN (2015) guidelines indicate that sexual dysfunction is common during and after cancer.

The Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS®) is a large collaborative effort between the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and several research institutions to develop tools to understand patient self-reported physical, psychological, and social well-being related to chronic disease (NIH, 2016). Flynn, Jeffery, et al. (2011) and Flynn, Reese, et al. (2011) used the PROMIS methodology in their focus group studies to assess patients' sexual health experiences across the cancer continuum. Their studies not only reiterated previous research findings that sexual health issues occur in patients with cancer at