

# Symptom Occurrence, Frequency, and Severity During Acute Colorectal Cancer Survivorship

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**OBJECTIVES:** To examine colorectal cancer (CRC) survivors' symptom characteristics (occurrence, frequency, and severity) during acute cancer survivorship.

**PARTICIPANTS & SETTING:** A cross-sectional study of 117 CRC survivors was conducted at a National Cancer Institute–designated cancer center in South Florida.

**METHODS & VARIABLES:** Symptom characteristics were assessed by the Therapy-Related Symptom Checklist. Participants completed a 25-item demographic questionnaire. Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests assessed between-group differences based on sex, age, education, and months since diagnosis. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify preliminary symptom clusters.

**RESULTS:** 117 CRC survivors completed the study (age range = 21–88 years, 56% male, and 79% stage IV). Common symptoms included peripheral neuropathy, fatigue/feeling sluggish, and skin changes. Significance was found between months since diagnosis and number of symptoms ( $p = 0.03$ ), suggesting that symptoms accumulate with time. Chemotherapy (85%) was the most common treatment type, and exploratory factor analysis identified two chemotherapy-related symptom clusters.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING:** Nurses are poised to identify, prevent, and promote self-management skills to reduce symptoms.

**KEYWORDS** cancer survivorship; chemotherapy; colon cancer; rectal cancer; symptoms

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Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a cancer of the digestive tract, colon, or rectum (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2021a). CRC is the fourth-leading cancer type and the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States (ACS, 2021a; National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2021; Siegel et al., 2019). Because of advances in early detection (e.g., colonoscopy, genetic screening) and treatment (e.g., surgical interventions), mortality rates have decreased by 2% since 2012 (Howlander et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2019). However, CRC survivors continue to manage the effects of a CRC diagnosis and its treatments. CRC survivors may develop numerous symptoms (e.g., depression, abdominal cramps and pain, weakness), physical or psychological subjective signs indicating an abnormal condition within the human body, typically caused by a disease or injury, which are measured by occurrence, frequency, and severity (Sreedhar, 2021; Stark et al., 2012).

Like other cancer survivors, CRC survivors develop a wide range of symptoms, including depression, body image disorder, sexual dysfunction, and neuropathy of the hands and feet (Röhrli et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Symptoms can affect survivors' functional status and quality of life throughout survivorship, the length of time a person has lived since their cancer diagnosis until the end of life, inclusive of medical and psychosocial care (Desheids et al., 2014; Miaskowski et al., 2017; Mosher & DuHamel, 2012; Xiao, 2010). Studies suggest that symptoms are reported more during acute cancer survivorship, the length of time from cancer diagnosis to the completion of treatment (Mullan, 1985). Because survivors begin medical treatments (e.g., surgical resection, radiation therapy, chemotherapy) that are dependent on cancer stage and location, they are prone to the development of symptoms from the CRC and its treatments (Albusoul