
CHAPTER 1

Overview

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Introduction

Cancers of the liver and pancreas are challenging problems in oncology. The five-year survival rates remain dismal for both types of cancer. This book is designed to provide an updated overview of cancers of the liver, bile duct, and gallbladder and exocrine and endocrine tumors of the pancreas. Symptom management and nutrition, psychosocial, and economic challenges will be detailed as they relate to pancreatic and liver cancers.

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the most common form of primary liver cancer, accounting for 80% of the reported cases. In 2012, the American Cancer Society estimated that the incidence of liver and intrahepatic bile duct cancers was 28,720 new cases, with 20,550 deaths from the disease estimated for the same time period (American Cancer Society, 2012). Overall, the five-year survival rate for liver cancer is 14%.

When referring to pancreatic cancer, we usually mean exocrine tumors of the pancreas. In 2012, the American Cancer Society estimated the incidence of pancreatic cancer to be 43,920 new cases, with 37,390 deaths from the disease estimated for the same period (American Cancer Society, 2012). Overall, the five-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer, for all stages, is 6%, and one-year survival is 26% (American Cancer Society, 2012).

Pancreatic endocrine tumors arising from endocrine tissue within the pancreas are much less common malignancies, accounting for 2% of all pancreatic cancers (Capelli et al., 2009).

According to the American Cancer Society’s 2012 statistical projections, the number of new U.S. cases of gallbladder and other biliary cancers is estimated to be 9,810, with 3,200 deaths estimated to occur (American Cancer Society, 2012).

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of liver and pancreatic cancers are similar and can include weight loss, poor appetite, ab-

dominal pain, and jaundice. Patients with pancreatic cancer can sometimes develop glucose intolerance. Liver enlargement is the most common physical sign of liver cancer, occurring in 50%–90% of patients (American Cancer Society, 2012).

Nutrition

Malnutrition is a common problem in patients with cancer and has been associated with adverse outcomes, including poor quality of life and increased morbidity and mortality. A poor prognostic indicator in patients with cancer is weight loss. The National Cancer Institute (2011) reported that at diagnosis, 80% of patients with gastrointestinal cancers are malnourished.

Because of the anatomic location of the pancreatic and hepatobiliary systems, patients with cancer are at an especially high risk for nutrition problems. The incidence of malnutrition in patients with pancreatic or hepatobiliary cancers is more common than with many other types of cancer (Bruera, 1997). Nutritional status may be affected by cancer itself as well as the treatments for the cancer. Nutrient needs may be altered by the disease or treatment. At the same time, the disease or treatment can change the patient’s ability to ingest, digest, and absorb the appropriate nutrients to meet these needs (Hurst & Gallagher, 2006).

Socioeconomics

The cost of cancer care is high in both dollars and human suffering. Because of the poor outcomes of patients with pancreatic and liver cancers, the costs are usually higher than with other cancers. Unfortunately, we know that disparities can exist in caring for patients with cancer. These disparities can be due to financial and geographic barriers, ineffective provider-patient communication, inadequate screening, and poor long-term follow-up, among other factors (National Institutes of Health, 2004).

During the course of diagnosis and treatment, patients experience many disruptions in their lives. Cancer symptoms and treatment side effects can interfere with patients' ability to carry on with a normal life. They may experience financial burdens, loss of work, and difficulties with interpersonal relationships.

The complicated health insurance systems can have an impact on any patient, regardless of socioeconomic status. Many patients find themselves underinsured or uninsured, leading to difficulties in managing their disease and finances. The role of the social worker in oncology is imperative to providing excellent patient care for all patients.

Summary

Liver and pancreatic cancers are complicated diseases of the gastrointestinal tract. They are, unfortunately, often met with poor outcomes. The nature of these diseases leads to complex treatment plans, complicated side effect management, poor nutrition, and challenges related to psychosocial and economic experiences.

This book seeks to provide an in-depth review of pancreatic and liver cancers. Caring for patients with liver and pancreatic cancers is difficult on many levels. A multidisciplinary approach is imperative for the care of these patients.

It is clear from the poor outcomes associated with liver and pancreatic cancers that additional research is needed in this area. Nurses can play an important role in the future research and outcomes of these patients.

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