Cancer Patients Often Wish They'd Been Told More About Side Effects

A nationwide survey found that health care providers could better prepare people for cancer treatment's burdens.

November 27, 2019 By Benjamin Ryan

People who have undergone cancer treatment often wish that their health care providers had better prepared them for the side effects they experienced.

So finds a national survey of 403 people treated for cancer with radiation therapy within the past five years. The survey was conducted by Public Opinion Strategies on behalf of the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) and published in the Journal of Oncology Practice.

"An unfortunate reality of cancer treatment is that therapy also has side effects that can impact a patient's quality of life," Reshma Jagsi, MD, DPhil, the senior author of the study and the Newman Family professor of radiation oncology at the University of Michigan, said in a press release. "Nearly all patients in the survey felt confident about their treatment decisions, but a sizable number also expressed a clear need for more information about potential side effects."

Thirty-seven percent of those who received radiation therapy, 36% of those who received chemotherapy and 34% of those who received surgery to treat their cancer said they would have liked to have received more information about the side effects they experienced. Thirty-eight percent of those who experienced severe side effects reported feeling insufficiently informed, compared with just 4% of those who reported minimal side effects.

The survey respondents said the radiation therapy side effects they experienced were generally in line with what they had expected. That said, 29% said they felt more tired and 28% said they felt weaker than they had expected.

"More in-depth patient counseling on these side effects could help us better prepare our patients for changes to their quality of life," said Narek Shaverdian, MD, the first author of the study and a radiation oncologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

The radiation-related side effects the respondents said they wish they'd learned more about included skin irritation, gastrointestinal symptoms and fatigue. Chemotherapy side effects people wished they had gotten more information about included nerve damage, gastrointestinal

symptoms and fatigue. As for side effects related to surgery, the survey participants wanted more information about pain, nerve damage and numbness.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read more about managing treatment side effects, click here.

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