

# Breast Cancer Survivors' Unmet Needs After Completion of Radiation Therapy Treatment

Michelle Pembroke, PhD, RN, OCN®, Julie Bradley, MD, and Lynne S. Nemeth, PhD, RN, FAAN

**PURPOSE:** To identify the unmet needs of breast cancer survivors after radiation therapy.

**PARTICIPANTS & SETTING:** Patients who received radiation therapy for unilateral breast cancer with six months or longer of follow-up and exhibited no disease progression were eligible for selection to a study conducted at an outpatient radiation therapy academic practice in the southeastern United States.

**METHODOLOGIC APPROACH:** A qualitative descriptive study was undertaken using semistructured interviews, framed by the five domains of the Survivor Unmet Needs Survey and analyzed using an iterative inductive and deductive process.

**FINDINGS:** Of the 24 invited patients, 17 agreed to the interview (including one male patient). Themes emerged from the emotional, relationships, and information needs domains: (a) the struggle with adapting to body image changes; (b) living with the fear of recurrence; (c) the unexpected impact of radiation dermatitis; and (d) the need for education to prepare for radiation therapy.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING:** Healthcare providers should perform a comprehensive needs assessment for patients with breast cancer receiving radiation therapy. Self-management assessment instruments may address patients' confidence in managing all phases of radiation therapy side effects.

**KEYWORDS** radiation therapy; breast cancer; survivorship care plans; patient education

**ONF, 47(4), 436–445.**

**DOI** 10.1188/20.ONF.436-445

Approximately 16.9 million people in the United States are considered cancer survivors, of whom about 67% have lived five years or more after initial diagnosis and 18% have lived 20 years or longer (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2020). The number of cancer survivors treated with radiation therapy is expected to reach 3.38 million in 2020 (Bryant et al., 2017). Breast cancer is among the most frequently diagnosed cancers in the United States. An estimated 320,000 individuals will be diagnosed in 2020, and approximately 40% will receive radiation therapy treatment (ACS, 2020; Bryant et al., 2017). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *From Cancer Patient to Cancer Survivor: Lost in Transition* identified the failure of the U.S. healthcare system to manage cancer survivors' needs beyond five years (Hewitt et al., 2005). The report recommends that healthcare workers provide continuous, lifelong care for cancer survivors, as well as anticipate survivors' needs (Hewitt et al., 2005). As cancer is more commonly being recognized as a chronic disease, as opposed to an acute diagnosis, continuity of care is vital to long-term surveillance of treatment-related side effects and early detection of secondary malignancies (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

## Cancer Survivorship

The definition of a cancer survivor has evolved since the IOM report and is now defined as an individual from the time of cancer diagnosis throughout the balance of his or her life, including family members caring for the individual (Nekhlyudov et al., 2017). One way to address providing continuity of care for patients along the cancer trajectory was the recommendation from the IOM to develop a survivorship care plan (SCP) to facilitate evidence-based surveillance guidelines and assessment tools for the management of treatment-related side effects (Hewitt et al., 2005). However, SCPs may not sufficiently address the