Finding a Place in Your Practice for Older Adults With Cancer

Peggy S. Burhenn, MS, Gero-BC RN, AOCNS®, OCN®, and Carolina Uranga, MSN, RN, AGCNS-BC, NPD-BC, OCN®

Because cancer is a disease of aging, most oncology nurses care for older adults. However, many oncology nurses have had little training in gerontology (Burhenn et al., 2021). An older adult is usually defined as someone who is aged 65 years or older, but aging is heterogeneous, and people can show signs of aging at different time points. In addition, cancer treatment can "geriatricize" some younger patients as their body systems are taxed, causing them to experience geriatric syndromes such as falls, depression, delirium, or functional decline (Guida et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). This article discusses the learning needs of oncology nurses as they relate to older adults, as well as geriatric assessment. Oncology nurses are a key interface between an older adult and their cancer journey and can use gerontology knowledge to improve the care of older adults with cancer (Burhenn et al., 2021).

Background

The care of older adults differs from the care of younger patients, and specialized knowledge about aging and caring for older adults can help guide their care. Nurses can use geriatric assessment tools, many of which can be completed within a few minutes and can be easily incorporated into encounters with older adults in oncology practice settings. The results of the assessments can be used to develop care plans that identify vulnerabilities or patient concerns.

AT A GLANCE

- Many oncology nurses have not received specialized training in the care of older adults.
- Older adults may present with vulnerabilities that are not detected in a standard clinical oncology care assessment.
- Oncology nurses are in a key position to use geriatric screening tools and develop a plan of care based on issues identified during the screening.

KEYWORDS

older adult; geriatric oncology; nursing; geriatric assessment; oncology

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/23.CJON.311-316