Cardiac Toxicity Related to Cancer Treatment

Victoria Wochna Loerzel, MSN, RN, OCN®, and Karen Hassey Dow, PhD, RN, FAAN

Cardiac toxicity is a dose-limiting toxicity that may occur during treatment or as a late effect of therapy. Chemotherapy, radiation therapy (RT), biotherapy, and targeted therapy contribute to cardiovascular compromise that can result in cardiomyopathy, congestive heart failure (CHF), dysrhythmias, and myocardial ischemia. Advances in treatment using limited multiagent chemotherapy and reduced volume of radiation treatment to the heart contribute to minimizing late cardiac toxicity. However, cardiac toxicity remains a cause of major morbidity and mortality among childhood, adolescent, and some adult cancer survivors (Chronowski et al., 2003; Donaldson, Hancock, & Hoppe, 1999; Mertens et al., 2001).

Data from the Childhood Cancer Survivors Study indicate that childhood and adolescent cancer survivors who lived more than five years after treatment were 8.8 times more likely to die from cardiac-related events (Mertens et al., 2001). Adults who receive high-dose chemotherapy for breast cancer or lymphoma and standard treatment for non-small cell lung cancer, as well as women who receive treatment for advanced breast cancer, also may experience cardiac dysfunction following treatment. Given the growing number of long-term cancer survivors, nurses must be informed about the potential for treatment-induced cardiotoxicity. This article reviews cardiotoxic treatments, signs and symptoms of cardiotoxicity, cardioprotective measures, and clinical implications.

Chemotherapy-Induced Cardiac Toxicity

Anthracyclines, alkylating agents, 5-fluorouracil (5-FU), and paclitaxel are the drugs most often associated with cardiac toxicity. These agents are associated with cardiomyopathy, CHF, dysrhythmias, and myocardial ischemia.

Anthracyclines

Anthracyclines are used to treat a variety of cancers and are the agents most widely associated with irreversible cardiomyopathy. Cardiotoxicity is thought to result from the release of free radicals during treatment that damage myocytes (cells of the myocardium). This damage leads to loss of myocardial contractility and eventual cell death (Hochster, Wasserheit, & Speyer, 1995; Shan, Lincoff, & Young, 1996; Speyer & Freedberg, 2000). Recent evidence indicates that oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction also may be key factors in the pathogenic process (Santos, Moreno, Leino, Froberg, & Wallace, 2002).

Although acute anthracycline-induced toxicity is rare (Shan et al., 1996), chronic conditions such as cardiomyopathy and CHF may develop over time and may be severe. Thomas, Le, and Fiore (2002) described three long-term survivors of acute promyelocytic leukemia who developed anthracycline-induced CHF that required cardiac transplantation.

Doxorubicin has been the most widely studied cardiotoxic agent in adult and pediatric patients. Daunorubicin, an agent primarily used in treating acute leukemia, has a cardiotoxic risk profile similar to doxorubicin. However, epirubicin and idarubicin, analogs similar to doxorubicin, are associated with cardiac toxicity to a lesser degree than doxorubicin.

Submitted March 2003. Accepted for publication April 4, 2003. (Mention of specific products and opinions related to those products do not indicate or imply endorsement by the Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing or the Oncology Nursing Society.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/03.CJON.557-562