Improving Sleep-Wake Disturbances in Patients With Cancer

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Patients with cancer tend to suffer sleep-wake disturbances at a higher rate than the general population. Insomnia and fatigue should be regarded as a significant patient safety issue, as poor sleep can elevate patients’ risks of falls, motor vehicle accidents, and acute infectious illnesses. To alleviate those risks, oncology nurses should be familiar with effective evidence-based practices for assessing and improving patients’ sleep quality. A variety of mechanisms underlie the association between cancer and sleep disturbances. Cancer and chemotherapy can each cause long-term neuroendocrine disruptions that, in turn, cause sleep disturbances (Miller, Ancoli-Israel, Bower, Capuron, & Irwin, 2008). Cancer-associated pain can interfere with rest (Sharma et al., 2012). Sleep disturbances have been documented in cancer survivors (Kaleyias, Manley, & Kothare, 2012), hospitalized pediatric patients with cancer (Hinds et al., 2007), those with pain-management problems (Abernethy, Bower, Capuron, & Irwin, 2008), and patients with advanced-stage cancer (Mystakidou et al., 2009).

A systematic review on sleep management of infectious risk (Bleijenberg, 2002). Assessment

Assessing sleep is an important component of nursing care and Miller et al. (2008) suggested that it be labeled as the sixth vital sign. Oncology nurses have opportunities to assess their patients for problems with sleepiness and help to prevent the safety hazards that can result. A systematic review on sleep management for patients with cancer (Howell et al., 2014) noted that many guidelines advise a two-step process of sleep assessment. First, nurses can use a simple screen consisting of one or two questions...