Cancer-Related Anemia: Clinical Review and Management Update

Beth Hurter, RN, MSN, CNP, OCN®, and Nancy Jo Bush, RN, MN, MA, AOCN®

Anemia is a decrease in circulating red blood cells that contributes to a complex group of symptoms. Anemia may be present in more than half of all patients with cancer but often is assessed, documented, prevented, and treated inadequately. Individuals with cancer are living longer, and the number of cancer treatment options provided at various points in the cancer continuum is growing; however, many treatments contribute to anemia. Because anemia can develop from multiple causes, treatment must be tailored to the underlying etiology. Cancer-related anemia can significantly affect therapeutic outcomes and patients' quality of life. Therapeutic interventions may include blood transfusions, administration of recombinant human erythropoietin, and interventions to support patient symptoms, most significantly, fatigue. Oncology nurses play a central role in risk assessment, symptom management, treatment planning, and evaluation and therefore must understand the etiology and physiology of cancer-related anemic states as well as evidence-based interventions to ensure optimal outcomes.

At a Glance

- Anemia often is assessed, documented, prevented, and treated inadequately.
- Cancer-related anemia can significantly affect therapeutic outcomes and patients’ quality of life.
- Oncology nurses play a central role along the continuum of care of patients experiencing cancer-related anemia.

A constant presence along the continuum of care; therefore, oncology nurses must be able to identify pertinent assessment criteria, identify patients at risk, carry out evidence-based interventions, and evaluate therapeutic outcomes.

Beth Hurter, RN, MSN, CNP, OCN®, is an acute care nurse practitioner of stem cell transplant at the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago, and Nancy Jo Bush, RN, MN, MA, AOCN®, is an oncology nurse practitioner and assistant clinical professor in the School of Nursing at the University of California, Los Angeles. The authors were participants in the 2005 CJON Writing Mentorship Program, which was underwritten through an unrestricted educational grant by Amgen, Inc. No financial relationships to disclose. 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. (Submitted February 2006. Accepted for publication September 22, 2006.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/07.CJON.349-359