Prostate cancer is the most common type of male-specific malignancy in the United States and Canada, with an estimated 186,320 Americans (American Cancer Society, 2008) and 24,700 Canadians (Canadian Cancer Society, 2008) being diagnosed in 2008. At some point of their illness, many men will experience uncertainty, which is believed to be a component of all illness experiences (Mishel, 1988, 1990). Uncertainty can negatively affect psychosocial adaptation and disease outcomes (McCormick, 2002). The fear of rising prostate-specific antigen levels, recurrence of cancer, and long-term side effects of prostate cancer treatment may mean that the condition becomes a chronic one for many patients.

Mishel (1990) defined uncertainty in chronic illness as the state of living with a debilitating condition in which the individual continuously questions the risks of recurrence or exacerbation and their unknown future. Consequently, uncertainty in chronic illness influences daily activities and routines (Cohen, 1993a; Weitz, 1989), negatively affects well-being (Clayton, Mishel, & Belyea, 2006), and is strongly related to mood disturbances (Taylor-Piliae & Molassiotis, 2001). This article aims to explore the concept, assessment, and management of uncertainty after treatment for prostate cancer.

The Uncertainty in Illness Theory

First proposed by Mishel (1981) as the Model of Perceived Uncertainty in Illness, the Uncertainty in Illness Theory (UIT) describes how patients cognitively process illness-related stimuli and assign meanings to events (Mishel, 1988). According to the UIT, uncertainty is a consequence of the inability to allocate specific values to objects and events or accurately predict outcomes of clinical interventions (Mishel, 1988; Mishel & Braden, 1987). Although uncertainty often is associated with undesirable events (Mast, 1995), the concept in the UIT is seen as neither a preferred nor an undesired state until the implications of uncertainty are determined (Mishel, 1988, 1990). In contrast, Hilton (1994) concluded from her studies on women coping with breast cancer that uncertainty is a perceptual state accompanied by emotions.