Oral cancer therapies are changing many of the treatment regimens in oncology. Use of oral medications to treat cancer has increased since 2005 (Goodin, 2007). In 2007, 20%–25% of antineoplastic drugs in development were oral agents (Moore, 2007). Nurses are faced with learning about the new agents along with helping patients manage side effects, procure drugs, and maintain adherence. Adherence is defined as the “extent to which a patient’s behavior coincides with medical advice” (World Health Organization, 2003, p. 17). Rates of nonadherence to a medication regimen range from 17% in patients with cancer to as high as 93% in patients with other medical conditions such as diabetes and hypertension (Hartigan, 2003).

Nurses are an essential part of the oncology team when teaching patients about IV chemotherapy, often taking responsibility for most of the teaching, whereas physicians often teach patients about their oral therapies. Nurses need to become frontline teachers when patients start oral therapy regimens. Their skill at helping patients with side-effect management, procurement, handling medications at home, and follow-up care can help increase patient adherence to medication, thereby increasing the efficacy of drug therapy.

Patient Education on Oral Therapy

The growth of oral medications stems from research in the areas of extra- and intracellular signaling pathways. By interfering with or blocking these signals, targeted drugs have become standard agents in cancer therapy. Because the pathways are specific, inhibition occurs at certain sites within the cell, which may cause unique side effects (Goodin, 2007).

Side effects may differ, and patients take the medications at home; therefore, patient education should be thorough and complete. Teaching should occur at the appropriate time. When a patient is first diagnosed or learns of recurrent or progressive