Chemotherapy-Induced Nausea and Vomiting

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Nausea and vomiting (N&V) is among the most distressing side effects of chemotherapy, despite the development of more efficacious antiemetic agents. As many as 60% of patients who receive cancer chemotherapy experience some degree of N&V. However, the actual incidence is difficult to determine with accuracy because of the variety of drugs, doses, and health conditions of the patients who receive cancer treatments. This article examines the state of the science related to chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting and reviews both pharmacologic and behavioral strategies that have demonstrated efficacy in managing these distressing symptoms.

In an analysis of 1,413 outpatients, the introduction of 5-HT₃ receptor antagonist antiemetics led to a significant reduction in the frequency of post-treatment vomiting; however, an accompanying increase in the duration of post-treatment nausea was noted (Roscoe, Morrow, Hickok, & Stern, 2000). The purpose of this article is to examine the state of the science related to chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting (CINV) and to review both pharmacologic guidelines and behavioral strategies that have demonstrated efficacy in managing these distressing symptoms. The article includes an examination of the research literature that explicates the underlying physiologic, psychologic, and pharmacologic mechanisms of CINV, as well as the supporting evidence related to currently available management strategies.

Definition of Terms

Nausea, vomiting, and retching are discrete symptoms that must be defined clearly and understood to accurately assess and measure these separate experiences (Rhodes & McDaniel, 2001). Nausea is a subjective, unobservable phenomenon of an unpleasant sensation experienced in the back of the throat and the epigastrium that may or may not culminate in vomiting (Rhodes & Watson, 1987). Vomiting is the forceful expulsion of the contents of the stomach, duodenum, or jejunum through the oral/nasal cavity (Rhodes & Watson). Retching is the attempt to vomit without bringing anything up (Rhodes & Watson). Rhodes (1997) encouraged clinicians and researchers to use terms that patients readily understand because many colloquial terms such as “queasiness” and “throwing up” frequently are substituted for these words. Anticipatory N&V (also referred to as conditioned, learned, or psychological N&V) is a phenomenon that is linked to repeated association of chemotherapy side effects with environmental stimuli. For example, certain tastes, sensations, smells, sights, or even thoughts experienced by patients who receive chemotherapy may evoke nausea or vomiting (Morrow, 1982; Nicholas, 1982; Pickett, 1991). Duigon (1986) suggested that after repeated associations with negative side effects of cancer chemotherapy, previously neutral stimuli develop signaling properties and become conditioned stimuli that can elicit a conditioned (nausea or vomiting) response.

CINV is classified further into three phases of time surrounding chemotherapy.