

## DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT

# Distress: Common Side Effect

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*For distress, standards of care are based on established evidence-based practice.*

## Definition

- Distress is a multifactorial and unpleasant emotional experience of a psychological (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, emotional), social, and/or spiritual nature that can interfere with the ability to effectively cope with a cancer diagnosis, physical symptoms and treatment, and long-term consequences of treatment.

## Incidence

- All patients are expected to experience some level of distress at some point in the cancer trajectory.

## Assessment Tools and Recommended Intervals

- NCCN Distress Thermometer and Problem List
  - Assess distress at every visit. Use NCCN's (2020) visual analog scale of 0 (no distress) to 10 (worst distress possible). A 39-item problem list helps to identify specific issues.
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 scale
  - Scores of 5, 10, and 15 may represent mild, moderate, and severe levels of anxiety, respectively (Spitzer et al., 2006). A score of 10 or more is a reasonable cut point for identifying cases of generalized anxiety disorder.

## Prevention

- Provide reputable resources for more information, from organizations such as the American Cancer Society, NCCN, or the National Cancer Institute.

## Evidence-Based Interventions and Management

- Recommend cognitive behavioral, supportive (individual and group), couples, or psychoeducational therapies.
- Consider antidepressants to treat anxiety and depression.
- Consider benzodiazepines to treat acute (not long-term) anxiety.
- Consider antipsychotics for delirium, agitation, and psychosis.
- Encourage 30 minutes of intentional exercise daily.
- Recommend integrative therapies, such as yoga, relaxation therapy, guided imagery, music therapy, and art therapy.
- Refer patients scoring 4 or higher on the NCCN Distress Thermometer to a mental health professional for intensive assessment and intervention.

## Agents and Interventions to Avoid

- Alcohol use can impair cognition and lead to depression.
- Discourage nonprescribed pharmacologic agents.

## Evidence-Based Resources for Providers

- *NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology: Distress* (v.2.2021) ([www.nccn.org/professionals/physician\\_gls/pdf/distress.pdf](http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/pdf/distress.pdf))

## Evidence-Based Resources for Patients and Family

- *NCCN Guidelines for Patients: Distress During Cancer Care* ([www.nccn.org/patients/guidelines/content/PDF/distress-patient.pdf](http://www.nccn.org/patients/guidelines/content/PDF/distress-patient.pdf))

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## KEYWORDS

cancer; symptoms; side effects; late effects; long-term side effects; survivorship care

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