

Family Caregivers in Cancer: Roles and Challenges—Health Professional Version (PDQ®)

Overview

Approximately 1.6 million new cases of cancer are expected to be diagnosed in the United States in 2016.[1] Many patients diagnosed with cancer will eventually require support from a family caregiver. In fact, family caregivers form the foundation of the health care system in the United States, supporting advances in treatment such as multimodality treatment protocols given in outpatient and home settings.[2]

Definition: Who Is the Caregiver?

Also referred to as *informal caregivers*, family caregivers provide a complex array of support tasks that extend across physical, psychological, spiritual, and emotional domains.[3] Generally speaking, more **women** than men become caregivers, most caregivers are related to the person who has cancer, and most caregivers are aged 55 years or older.[4,5]

Family caregivers play an important role in the management of cancer; enlisting their cooperation and including them as the unit of care from the outset are considered critical ingredients to effective cancer management. Most oncology teams recognize this and try to include family caregivers in treatment planning, decision making, and implementation.[6] However, for interventions to be feasible, they must be appropriate within the constraints of busy oncology practices and service delivery environments.[7] Short-term hospital admissions may also restrict the time available to implement supportive strategies for caregivers.

Information about the following is included in this summary:

- An overview of the caregiver's perspective across the illness trajectory in cancer.
- Typical caregiver roles and concerns.
- Helpful interventions.

In this summary, unless otherwise stated, evidence and practice issues as they relate to adults are discussed. The evidence and application to practice related to children may differ significantly from information related to adults. When specific information about the care of children is available, it is summarized under its own heading.

References

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