



Spouses, partners share mental distress of cancer

Spouses of cancer patients suffer distress and depression at levels equal to or greater than their partners, according to a recent study published by the Journal of Clinical Oncology. The study's authors called for more mental health intervention to help spouses cope with the emotional and social costs of the disease and its treatment.

The April 2007 study, titled "Late Effects of Cancer and Hematopoietic Stem-Cell Transplantation on Spouses or Partners Compared With Survivors and Survivor-Matched Controls," is the first to examine the long-term impact that cancer and stem-cell transplantation exerts on patients' spouses. Among the 177 couples studied, researchers found that both patients and caregiving spouses reported equal levels of distress, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems. Researchers were surprised to find, however, that spouses scored lower on quality-of-life issues such as spiritual well-being and marital adjustment. Spouses also reported less social support and more loneliness than cancer survivors themselves, the study showed.

"Most striking was that these effects were found an average of seven years after HCT [stem cell transplantation], when presumably active caregiving is long over," said the researchers, who included doctors from several major universities and from the Center for International Blood and Marrow Transplant Research.

The study results add to a growing body of evidence indicating that spouses suffer significantly from the chronic strain of dealing with the illness, treatment, and aftermath of cancer. Understanding these long-term effects should lead to better prevention and treatment options for families, the study suggested, including education, group support, and individual and family counseling. Doctors and other healthcare professionals should ask survivors and their family members about depression and stress levels and offer help when needed.

If you need help finding a mental health expert, contact your transplant center, a local cancer center, or the American Psychological Oncology Society at (866) 276-7443 or www.apos-society.org. To read the full study, please visit

<http://www.cibmtr.org/ReferenceCenter/Patient/PatientSummaries/Pages/index.aspx>.

Source: Late Effects of Cancer and Hematopoietic Stem-Cell Transplantation on Spouses or Partners Compared With Survivors and Survivor-Matched Controls. Bishop MM, Beaumont JL, Hahn EA, Cella D, Andrykowski MA, Brady MJ, Horowitz MM, Sobocinski KA, Rizzo JD, Wingard JR. Journal of Clinical Oncology. 25 (11), April 10, 2007.