

The Fatigue Experience of African American Women with Breast Cancer

Phyllis D. Morgan, Ph.D., FNP-BC

Abstract

Little is known about fatigue related to breast cancer among African American women. This qualitative study explored the fatigue experience of **10 African American women with breast cancer**. The study was conducted in the southeastern United States. African American women provided vivid accounts of cancer related fatigue. The women discussed how they worked together with their physicians to manage fatigue related to breast cancer treatment. Strategies used by women included **pharmacologic** (i.e., vitamins and supplements) and **non-pharmacologic** (i.e., prayer and exercise) interventions. This information can be used to assist breast health advocates to understand how to support African American women with breast cancer using culturally appropriate strategies.

Problem

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among African American women. African American women are often diagnosed with more aggressive tumors which often requires more aggressive cancer treatments when compared to women from other ethnic/racial groups.

Fatigue is one of the most debilitating symptoms experienced by women undergoing breast cancer treatment. Few studies have focused on the fatigue experience of African American women with breast cancer.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to gain more insight about fatigue related to breast cancer among African American women.

Research Questions

How do AA women describe their fatigue related to breast cancer treatment?

What strategies do AA women use to manage fatigue related to breast cancer treatment?

Relevant Literature

Cancer-related fatigue is defined by the National Comprehensive Cancer Network Cancer-Related Fatigue Guidelines (2014) as a “distressing, persistent, subjective sense of tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer or cancer treatment that is not proportional to recent activity and interferes with usual functioning.”

African American women have a higher death rate from breast cancer when compared to women from other ethnic/racial backgrounds (American Cancer Society, 2013). African American women may choose to delay or refuse treatment for breast cancer because of issues of how cancer treatment may negatively impact their quality of life.

Symptom distress related to breast cancer treatment has been associated with poorer quality of life among African American women breast cancer survivors. There is a dearth of literature on African American women’s experiences of side effects related to breast cancer treatment and management (Masi & Gehlert, 2008; Morgan et al., 2005; Von Ah et al., 2012).

Interview Guide

1. Please tell me how your breast cancer was discovered.
2. Please tell me when you sought medical treatment for breast cancer.
3. Please tell me how you felt before you started your breast cancer treatment. Physically? Emotionally? Spiritually?
4. Please tell me about your treatment regimen for breast cancer.
5. Were you informed about any side effects related to breast cancer treatment? If so, please explain what you were told. What information resources did you receive about the side effects of fatigue?
6. Please tell me how you have felt since starting/completing your breast cancer treatment.
7. Please tell me how you would describe your fatigue. Is it or was it like you were told?
8. Over the past week, please describe how you have felt.
9. Please tell me what has assisted you the most in managing your fatigue.
10. Please tell me how the fatigue has impacted your daily activities.

Procedures

Sample

- Purposeful sample of **10 African American women**

Data Collection

- 10 item semi-structured interview guide designed by research team
- Demographic questionnaire

Procedure

- Face-to-face interviews ranging from 45-60 minutes
- \$50 incentive was used

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics: Demographic data analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Qualitative Data: Content analysis for recurrent and constant themes. Four doctoral researchers analyzed data.

Findings

Common Descriptors of Fatigue

- Weak
- Tired
- Lethargic
- Depressed
- Disconnected
- Lack of Energy
- Feeling Helpless
- Feeling Burned Out
- Feeling Washed Out
- Feeling too Tired to Rest
- Feeling of Being in a Black Hole

Common Strategies to Manage Fatigue

- Exercise
- Prayer/Spirituality
- Rest & Recuperation
- Vitamins & Supplements

Limitations

The African American women in this study were

- not required to provide detailed information about the type of radiation and/or chemotherapy prescribed by their physicians
- at various stages of breast cancer experience
- from a higher socioeconomic background
- from one geographic location in southeastern United States
- no cross cultural comparisons

Conclusions

Maintaining activities of daily living, such as cooking and cleaning, were challenging and sometimes overwhelming for African American women.

Spirituality played a major role in African American women coping with fatigue related to breast cancer.

African American women descriptors of fatigue are similar to other studies focused primarily on Caucasian women experiencing fatigue related to breast cancer treatment.

Larger studies are needed to examine interventions used by women from various/ethnic racial backgrounds to manage fatigue related to breast cancer treatment.

Social Change Implications

This project demonstrates that breast cancer can be a very debilitating disease for African American women undergoing breast cancer treatment.

The information shared among African American women breast cancer survivors can help **breast health advocates** better understand the impact of a breast cancer diagnosis and determine culturally appropriate strategies to support African American women before, during, and after treatment.

This project was funded by P20 MD001089-01 from the National Institution of Health, NCMHD, and Department of Health and Human Services awarded to Fayetteville State University.