

Journal Watch

Chemosensory Changes Experienced by Patients undergoing Cancer Chemotherapy: A Qualitative Interview Study.

Presented by: Vickie Baracos, February 12, 2008 on the Tertiary Palliative Care Unit Grey Nuns Hospital during rounds.

Reference: Bernhardson BM, Tishelman C, Rutqvist LE. J Pain Symptom Manage. 2007; 34(4):403-12.

Abstract: Few studies explore patients' experiences of smell and taste changes during cytotoxic chemotherapy. Issues, such as how such changes impact daily life, their consequences, and how patients respond to chemotherapy-induced chemosensory changes, have not previously been systematically addressed. The aim of this study was to examine these questions by exploring experiences of chemotherapy-induced chemosensory changes. In this qualitative longitudinal study, semi structured interviews were conducted with 14 women and 7 men with a variety of cancer diagnoses, who were known to have smell and taste changes. The participants were chosen for heterogeneity in regard to factors that might impact on experiences of chemotherapy. Participants were followed monthly until chemosensory changes ceased. There was great individual variation in patterns, intensity and impact of smell and/or taste changes, with changes reported to have ceased in all participants within 3.5 months after treatment ended. While not all participants found reported changes "bothersome," those who did reported predominantly emotional and social consequences. Smell and taste changes were said to be influenced by, or to influence, other symptoms, for example, appetite loss, early satiation, nausea, and oral problems. Although participants said they lacked ways to manage chemosensory changes, coping strategies described included frequent oral hygiene, searching for tolerable food, relying on smell and taste memory, and acceptance of changes. Although chemosensory changes resolved in all participants within several months after completed chemotherapy, the reported variation in experiences of taste and smell changes makes these side effects especially challenging to assess and alleviate.

Strengths: The only publication of which I am aware, delineating patient experience of taste and smell dysfunction

Weaknesses: Few, a study conducted using qualitative approaches and therefore small, but rigorously done

Relevance to Palliative Care: This symptom affects a lot of palliative patients and probably it matters little that this study has been conducted on patients in active chemotherapy. It points to a good deal of emotional and social disruption, and while we may not have many avenues to treat taste and smell dysfunction, it seems that it would be helpful for patients, for us to acknowledge it.

