COPING WITH ILLNESS

Need to address anxiety issues faced by breast cancer patients: Study

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SINGAPORE – More attention should be paid to the psychological issues faced by breast cancer patients and survivors, particularly those who are undergoing chemotherapy, a first-of-its-kind study by the National University of Singapore (NUS) suggests.

Involving 319 participants with early-stage (Stages I to III) breast cancer from the National Cancer Centre Singapore, researchers from the NUS Department of Pharmacy looked at the anxiety levels of patients across different stages of chemotherapy.

The study, conducted between August 2009 and January last year, found that participants who were receiving chemotherapy treatment experienced higher degrees of anxiety, compared to those who had yet to start chemotherapy and those who had completed chemotherapy.

Among those undergoing chemotherapy, about 30 per cent experienced moderate and higher levels of anxiety. For the post-chemotherapy group, about 20 per cent had moderate and beyond levels of anxiety. However, for the pre-chemotherapy participants, this proportion was about 9 per cent.

According to the researchers, toxicities induced by chemotherapy drugs will result in symptoms such as dizziness and numbness. Patients will also report hair loss and weight gain.

These factors put those undergoing chemotherapy at greater risk of anxiety. Even for post-chemotherapy individuals, researchers noted that some of the psychological side effects would be carried over from the chemotherapy period.

The study was published online in the Supportive Care in Cancer Journal in March. It was led by NUS pharmacy PhD student Cheung Yin Ting under the supervision of Associate Professor Alexandre Chan.

Breast cancer is the No 1 cancer among women in Singapore making up about 30 per cent of all cancers found in women between 2006 and 2010. Nevertheless, cancer survivor rates are also improving internationally due to earlier detection and better treatments.

Said Assoc Prof Chan: “The majority of (research) work... has been dedicated to looking for answers for cancer treatment. (But) we have come to a stage where a lot of cancers are curable and we have to think about how to improve the survivorship of our patients... to give them the best time and care.”

To improve breast cancer patients’ and survivors’ quality of life, there should be greater awareness on the psychological issues they face, allowing for referrals to appropriate help, he added. Among other things, he suggested more dedicated services to manage chemotherapy-induced side effects.

Following this study, the team will be embarking on a longitudinal study to better understand anxiety changes across the different stages of chemotherapy, tracking patients throughout the treatment process.