

IMPLEMENTATION OF A STANDARDIZED APPROACH TO BREATHLESSNESS
MANAGEMENT IN PATIENTS WITH CANCER: A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

By

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Abstract

Background: A significant number of cancer patients continue to experience burdensome breathlessness that is inconsistently assessed and lacks complete palliation in clinical settings. Given the vast number of cancer patients experiencing breathlessness at some point in their disease trajectory, the severity, and impact on quality of life of this distressing symptom must be evaluated and treated.

Purpose: The purpose of this quality improvement (QI) project was to standardize the assessment of breathlessness in high-risk cancer patients and increase nursing staff confidence in providing breathlessness interventions.

Methods: A descriptive pre-posttest design was utilized to evaluate the educational intervention and the clinical impact of a new breathlessness algorithm. Retrospective chart review was completed to evaluate the utilization of an existing breathlessness assessment tool. Descriptive statistics were used to assess change in nurses' knowledge, confidence, and attitude related to breathlessness.

Results: Nursing staff confidence related to breathlessness assessment and management improved following an educational intervention and implementation of a breathlessness algorithm. There was no change in nurses' knowledge and attitude. Following interventions, 20% of high-risk patients received breathlessness assessment, with approximately 80% reporting some level of breathlessness. Overall, nurses felt the algorithm was beneficial in assessing and managing patients with breathlessness.

Conclusions: Implementation of a breathlessness algorithm and nurse education may be effective in improving breathlessness assessment and nurses' confidence in providing therapeutic and palliative interventions to cancer patients.