



DESCRIPTIVE, CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

Characterization of chronic pain in breast cancer survivors using the McGill Pain Questionnaire



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KEYWORDS

Pain measurement;
Chronic pain;
Breast-conserving surgery;
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Summary The aim of the present study was to characterize pain in breast cancer survivors using the McGill Pain Questionnaire (MPQ). A descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted with 30 women aged 30–80 years who had been submitted to treatment for breast cancer (surgery and complementary treatment) at least 12 months earlier with reports of pain related to the therapeutic procedures. Pain was characterized using the full-length version of the MPQ, which is made up of 78 descriptors divided into four categories: sensory (ten items), affective (five items), evaluative (one item) and miscellaneous (four items). Two indices were also used to measure pain through the use of the descriptors: the number of words chosen (NWC) and the pain rating index (PRI). The most frequent descriptive terms were “agonizing” ($n = 16$; 53.3%), “tugging” ($n = 15$; 50%), “sore” ($n = 14$; 46.7%), “wretched” ($n = 14$; 46.7%), “troublesome” ($n = 13$; 43.3%) and “spreading” ($n = 11$; 36.7%). The sensory category had the highest PRI value based on the descriptors chosen (mean: 0.41). Women with chronic pain following

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treatment for breast cancer employed the “agonizing”, “tugging” and “sore” descriptors with greatest frequency and rated pain in the sensory category as having the greatest impact.
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Introduction

Chronic pain related to treatment for breast cancer is that which persists for more than three months following surgery and complementary treatment. Chronic pain was once believed to be a very frequent finding in women submitted to such procedures (Carpenter et al., 1998), but the incidence is currently reported to range from 25 to 60% (Fabro et al., 2012; Gärtner et al., 2009). Such pain often affects the anterior and/or lateral region of the thorax, axilla and upper limb (MacDonald et al., 2005).

The evaluation of pain in clinical and investigative contexts is complex due to its multidimensional nature (Silva and Ribeiro-Filho, 2011; Colhado et al., 2013). Assessment tools have been developed to measure and characterize pain. Researchers have commonly employed different assessment tools in the evaluation of patients with different types of pain, such as algometry (Melia et al., 2014), the Numerical Rating Scale, the Visual Analogue Scale, the Faces Pain Scale (Ferreira-Valente et al., 2011), the Catastrophizing Scale (Wong et al., 2014) and the Brief Pain Inventory (Lieberman et al., 2014).

Few studies in the literature have addressed methods for the evaluation of chronic pain in breast cancer survivors. Jud et al. (2010) identified pain sites using drawings of the human body and found that women submitted to mastectomy indicated a larger area of pain in comparison to patients who were submitted to conservative treatment. According to Pimentel et al. (2007), pain is a more frequent symptom in women who were submitted to axillary lymphadenectomy. In a study involving women who were submitted to either mastectomy or lumpectomy, Ferreira et al. (2014) found that pain was daily, constant and related to the surgical procedure. Cantarero-Villanueva et al. (2012) conducted a clinical trial with breast cancer survivors and found a reduction in pain, an increase in the pressure pain threshold and a reduction in the number of myofascial trigger points after an aquatic physical therapy protocol.

The McGill Pain Questionnaire (MPQ) is another widely employed method for the measurement of pain. This questionnaire was developed to assess the sensory, affective and evaluative dimensions of pain (Melzack, 1975; Menezes Costa et al., 2011). The MPQ tool allows the focus on both quantitative and qualitative aspects and can be used by any healthcare professional interested in evaluating the clinical phenomena of pain (Melzack, 1975). Moreover, a recent integrative review of the literature demonstrated the usefulness of the MPQ for the evaluation of pain in patients with different types of cancer (Ngamkham et al., 2012). However, studies on the use of the MPQ for the evaluation of chronic pain following surgical procedures and complementary treatments in breast cancer survivors are scarce.

It is important to identify and characterize pain in breast cancer survivors in a holistic fashion considering the diverse aspects involved in this clinical condition, including a psychophysical approach as well as qualitative, subjective, emotional, motivational and cultural components (Silva and Ribeiro-Filho, 2011; Colhado et al., 2013). Thus, the present study was designed to guide physiotherapists and healthcare professionals to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of pain and be better able to monitor this aspect during a rehabilitation program for women with chronic pain stemming from the treatment of breast cancer. Given the above, the aim of the present study was to characterize pain in breast cancer survivors using the MPQ.

Methods

Study design

A descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted. A researcher with experience in the use of the MPQ administered this assessment tool in interview form in a well-lit, climate-controlled, isolated location with no time restrictions.

This study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Nursing School of Ribeirão Preto of the University of São Paulo (Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil) under process number 162/2007. After receiving clarifications regarding the objectives and procedures, volunteers who agreed to participate in the study signed a statement of informed consent.

Sample

Through verbal invitations, 30 women enrolled at the Breast Cancer Teaching, Research and Rehabilitation Center (Nursing School of Ribeirão Preto University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil) were recruited. The inclusion criteria were age 30–80 years, having been submitted to treatment for breast cancer (surgery and complementary treatment) at least 12 months earlier and reports of chronic pain related to the therapeutic procedures. The exclusion criteria were current surgical or complementary (radiotherapy and chemotherapy) treatment, recurrence and/or metastasis, neurological disorder, osteoarticular disorder and a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. All the women recruited were selected, as they all met the eligibility criteria.

McGill Pain Questionnaire

The full version of the MPQ was used for the evaluation of pain, which has been translated into Portuguese and

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