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Impact of Breast Cancer and Its Treatment on Quality of Life: A Comprehensive Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Muhammad Kamran khan¹, Uzma Faryal², Sara Jadoon³, Amer Ali Khan⁴, Nabeel Shakeel Ahmed⁵, Farnaz Iqbal Khan⁶, Malyla Amir⁷

¹Assistant Professor, Dawadmi College of medicine, Shaqra University, KSA

² Associate Professor, Basic Medical Sciences College of Medicine, Shaqra University, kingdom of Saudi Arabia

³Assistant Professor Anatomy department Ayub medical College Abbottabad

⁴Assistant Professor, College of medicine, Shaqra University, KSA

⁵Lecturer, community medicine, Abbottabad international medical college

⁶Lecturer Anatomy, Abbottabad International Medical college, Abbottabad, Pakistan

⁷BDS, Women medical and dental college Abbottabad.

(corresponding author): Dr. Sara Jadoon

Assistant Professor Anatomy department Ayub medical College Abbottabad

Email: sarashafqat@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Background: Breast cancer is a prevalent disease that significantly impacts physical, emotional, and social well-being. Assessing and improving the quality of life (QoL) of patients during and after treatment is increasingly recognized as vital.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative (EORTC QLQ-C30, QLQ-BR23) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) data was used. The study was conducted at a hospital, examining breast cancer patients at various stages of treatment.

Results: Quantitative findings showed QoL decline during treatment, particularly in physical, emotional, and social functioning. Qualitative data revealed issues like psychological distress, body image concerns, and the importance of social support.

Discussion: Breast cancer treatment substantially impacts QoL, with physical limitations and psychological distress being common challenges. Post-treatment recovery in some areas highlights the importance of addressing both medical and psychosocial needs.

Conclusion: The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive, patient-centered care, addressing both physical and emotional aspects of life. Post-treatment rehabilitation and ongoing support are crucial for improving overall QoL in breast cancer survivors.

Introduction:

Breast cancer is one of the most prevalent cancers worldwide, affecting millions of women each year.¹ Breast cancer, characterized by the uncontrolled growth of malignant cells in the breast tissue, is one of the most prevalent cancers globally, with significant impacts on both the anatomy and physiology of affected individuals.² The disease typically involves alterations in breast tissue architecture, leading to tumor formation, lymph node involvement, and potential metastasis.³ Biochemically, breast cancer cells often exhibit dysregulated signaling pathways, including those involving estrogen receptors, HER2, and the PI3K-Akt pathway, which contribute to tumor growth and resistance to therapies.⁴ Pathologically, breast cancer is classified into various subtypes based on histological features, including ductal and lobular carcinomas, with prognosis and treatment varying according to the tumor's grade, stage, and molecular profile.⁵ These biological factors play a crucial role in shaping the physical, emotional, and social aspects of a patient's quality of life, making comprehensive care essential for improving overall well-being.

Quality of life, a multidimensional concept that includes physical, emotional, social, and functional well-being, has become an essential outcome measure for evaluating the success of cancer treatment. It is increasingly recognized that survival alone is not sufficient to measure the true impact of cancer and its therapies on a patient's life.

The assessment of QoL is critical in cancer care because the disease and its treatment can affect various aspects of daily living, from physical functioning to mental health and social interactions.⁶ Patients with breast cancer often experience a wide range of symptoms such as pain, fatigue, nausea, and emotional distress.⁷ In addition, side effects from treatments like chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery can further compromise QoL, influencing patients' ability to carry out everyday activities and engage in social and family roles. Moreover, aspects such as body image concerns, sexual functioning, and psychological well-being also play a significant role in how patients perceive their quality of life during and after treatment.⁸

The importance of QoL extends beyond its role in patient well-being; it also has practical implications for clinical decision-making, treatment planning, and the evaluation of therapeutic interventions.⁹ While survival rates are a primary focus of cancer treatment, ensuring that patients live well during their treatment and into survivorship is equally important.¹⁰ QoL assessments can offer valuable insights into how patients are coping with the physical and emotional challenges of cancer and provide clinicians with essential information to tailor care plans accordingly.¹¹

Given the complexity of the disease and its treatment, QoL in breast cancer patients can be influenced by multiple factors, including the type of surgery (mastectomy vs. breast-conserving surgery), the use of systemic therapies such as chemotherapy and hormonal treatments, psychological distress, symptom management, and supportive care interventions.¹² Each of these elements can affect a patient's overall sense of well-being in different ways, making it essential to evaluate QoL from various perspectives.

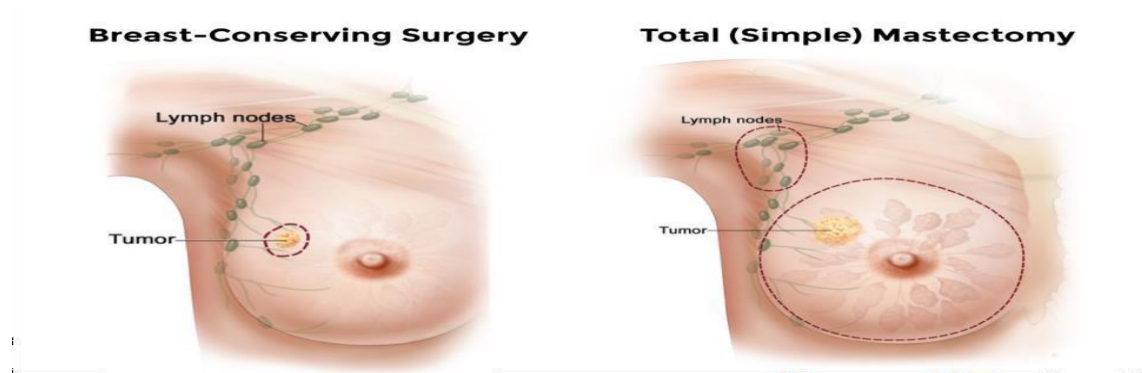


Figure 1: mastectomy vs. breast-conserving surgery.¹³

Materials and methods:

For this study on the quality of life in breast cancer patients, a methodology would involve a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The study could be conducted at a hospital or cancer center, where breast cancer patients undergoing treatment or in remission would be recruited. Ethical approval would be obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring patient consent for participation in the study.

Quantitative data could be gathered using validated instruments such as the EORTC QLQ-C30, the EORTC QLQ-BR23, or the FACT-B questionnaire, which are commonly used to assess quality of life in cancer patients. These instruments would be administered to patients at various stages of their treatment, including pre-treatment, during treatment (chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery), and post-treatment (remission or survivorship). Laboratory techniques could also be incorporated to assess physiological markers that might influence quality of life, such as blood biomarkers, hormone levels, and immune system function, which could be correlated with changes in QoL scores. Additionally, medical records and treatment histories could be analyzed to identify the impact of specific interventions on patients' quality of life.

Qualitative data could be collected through semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions with patients, caregivers, and healthcare providers. These interviews would explore patients' emotional, psychological, and social experiences, as well as their perceptions of how their condition and treatment affect their daily lives. The interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, including challenges related to body image, sexual functioning, psychological distress, and social support. This mixed-methods approach would provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing quality of life in breast cancer patients and allow for a nuanced interpretation of the quantitative results in the context of patients' personal experiences.

Results:

The first table summarizes the **quantitative quality of life scores** for breast cancer patients at different stages: pre-treatment, during treatment, and post-treatment/remission. The scores reflect

the patients' physical, emotional, and social functioning, as well as common symptoms like fatigue, pain, and sleep disturbances.

Table 1: Quantitative Results - Quality of Life Scores for Breast Cancer Patients (using EORTC QLQ-C30 and EORTC QLQ-BR23)

Parameter	Pre-Treatment (Mean Score)	During Treatment (Mean Score)	Post-Treatment/Remission (Mean Score)
Physical Functioning	80	55	75
Role Functioning	85	60	80
Emotional Functioning	75	50	70
Social Functioning	80	60	85
Fatigue	25	65	40
Pain	15	45	25
Sleep Disturbances	20	50	30
Body Image (EORTC QLQ-BR23)	80	40	75
Sexual Functioning (EORTC QLQ-BR23)	75	30	60
Breast Symptoms (EORTC QLQ-BR23)	10	40	15

The table 2 summarizes the **qualitative themes** identified in interviews with breast cancer patients, revealing key aspects of their quality of life. Common concerns include **psychological distress** (65% of participants), **body image issues** (50%), and **sexual dysfunction** (55%). Positive **social support** (70%) from family and friends was crucial for emotional well-being. Additionally, many patients faced persistent **fatigue** and **physical limitations** (60%), while **satisfaction with treatment** was generally high (80%). However, financial and employment concerns affected 45% of patients, highlighting the broader challenges of managing life after cancer.

Table 2: Qualitative Results - Common Themes Identified in Interviews with Breast Cancer Patients

Theme	Description	Percentage of Participants
Psychological Distress	Feelings of anxiety, depression, and fear of recurrence were common, even after treatment.	65%
Body Image Concerns	Patients, particularly those who underwent mastectomy, reported dissatisfaction with their appearance.	50%
Sexual Dysfunction	Many patients experienced reduced sexual desire, discomfort during sex, and intimacy concerns.	55%
Social Support and Relationships	Positive support from family and friends was critical for emotional well-being and recovery.	70%
Fatigue and Physical Limitations	Persistent fatigue and limitations in physical activity were major contributors to reduced QoL.	60%
Satisfaction with Treatment	Patients were generally satisfied with medical treatment, although side effects were challenging.	80%
Financial and Employment Concerns	Concerns over financial burden and challenges returning to work after treatment were highlighted.	45%

Discussion:

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data highlight the significant impact of breast cancer and its treatment on patients' quality of life. The decrease in physical, emotional, and social functioning during treatment, as shown in the quantitative results, reflects the challenging side effects and psychological distress that accompany cancer therapies. The most prominent symptoms such as fatigue, pain, and body image issues significantly impair day-to-day life and well-being, suggesting the need for more comprehensive care strategies that address both the physical and emotional aspects of treatment.¹⁴ Despite these challenges, patients report some recovery in quality of life following treatment, especially in terms of social functioning and body image, underlining the importance of post-treatment support and rehabilitation.

Qualitative themes further emphasize the psychological and emotional toll of breast cancer, with many patients experiencing persistent anxiety, depression, and body image concerns, even after treatment. The role of **social support** in mitigating these feelings is critical, as family and friends provide essential emotional strength. However, issues like **sexual dysfunction, fatigue, and financial concerns** remain prevalent, even in remission, highlighting the need for ongoing care and resources for breast cancer survivors. These findings underscore the importance of considering the full spectrum of a patient's experience when assessing the effectiveness of cancer treatment and recovery, pointing to the need for holistic, patient-centered care that addresses both medical and psychosocial needs.

Conclusion:

The study underscores the significant impact of breast cancer and its treatment on patients' quality of life, affecting physical, emotional, and social well-being. The quantitative findings reveal a decline in various aspects of quality of life during treatment, with some recovery post-treatment, particularly in social functioning and body image. However, challenges such as fatigue, pain, psychological distress, and sexual dysfunction persist, even after remission. Qualitative data further emphasize the importance of social support and the ongoing need for comprehensive care that addresses both the physical and emotional aspects of a patient's experience. The results suggest that for effective breast cancer care, treatment plans must consider the holistic needs of patients, incorporating psychological support, symptom management, and post-treatment rehabilitation to improve overall quality of life.

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