HOT TOPICS

Obese Cancer Patients Are Often Undertreated

Obese women are more likely to suffer recurrence of their breast cancer and are less likely to survive than their thinner counterparts. Although this difference has been attributed to physiological factors, it may in fact be the result of undertreatment. When determining the proper dose for chemotherapeutic drugs, doctors typically consider the patient’s body surface measurements, determined from body weight and height. But some doctors apparently give their obese breast cancer patients smaller doses than their size would dictate, fearing the occurrence of toxic side effects and long-term complications from high doses of chemotherapy, although little evidence supports such concerns. A new study by RAND Health researchers confirms the prevalence of this practice. The study, which examined the medical files of more than 9,500 women treated for breast cancer from 1990 to 2001, found that obese women with breast cancer are more than twice as likely as healthy weight women to receive lower doses of chemotherapy than a size-based formula would indicate they need. The study also found that size-based dosages did not increase the risk of side effects. Administration of the full weight-based doses is likely to improve treatment outcomes for obese women.

READ MORE: Obese Women Receiving Breast Cancer Chemotherapy Are Often Undertreated

The Effectiveness and Safety of Weight Loss Surgery

The increasing prevalence of obesity has raised interest in weight loss surgery, also known as bariatric surgery, which has been linked to considerable weight loss but serious, sometimes fatal, complications. An analysis of nearly 150 published studies of the procedures by the Southern California Evidence-Based Practice Center at RAND, funded by the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, finds that most of the FDA-approved agents—including orlistat and sibutramine, the most widely studied prescription diet aids—promote moderate weight loss (11 pounds or less per year) when prescribed along with recommendations for dieting and exercise. Side effects were reported for each of the drugs, including insomnia and gastrointestinal upset, but not enough information was available to determine whether they pose any long-term risks. Although few of the reports assessed whether use of the drugs resulted in improvements in obesity-related medical problems, the evidence does suggest that people who lose weight using the drugs are less likely to develop diabetes; weight loss is also associated with improved blood sugar and cholesterol levels. The study also did not examine the effectiveness or safety of over-the-counter medications or supplements touted to promote weight loss.

READ MORE: Some Prescription Diet Drugs Promote Weight Loss

FORTHCOMING PROJECT

Can Electronic Medical Record Systems Transform Health Care?

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