



## Lived Experiences of Cancer Patients Managing Treatment Side Effects with Supportive Pharmaceutical Therapies

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### ABSTRACT

Cancer treatment, particularly chemotherapy, is associated with a range of physical and psychological side effects that significantly impact patients' quality of life. While supportive pharmaceutical therapies have been used to mitigate these effects, the subjective experiences of patients in managing these side effects remain underexplored. Despite the growing body of research on cancer treatment, there is a lack of in-depth understanding regarding the emotional and psychological dimensions of managing medication side effects through supportive care. This study aims to address this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore cancer patients' lived experiences with supportive pharmaceutical therapies. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 cancer patients (6 women and 4 men, aged 35–65) undergoing chemotherapy at a tertiary care hospital in [country/region]. The analysis revealed three main themes: (1) the struggle with unpredictable physical symptoms such as nausea, fatigue, and neuropathy; (2) the emotional burden marked by anxiety, fear of recurrence, and social withdrawal; and (3) the restorative role of supportive pharmaceutical therapies in fostering emotional resilience and restoring a sense of control over daily life. While these therapies alleviated physical symptoms, patients emphasized their particular role in reducing stigma, improving sleep quality, and enhancing family interactions. However, the findings should be interpreted within the contextual limitations of a single-site study with a relatively small sample size, which may not capture the diversity of experiences across different cancer types or cultural backgrounds. These findings contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of integrating mental health support into cancer treatment regimens and underscore the need for more holistic, patient-centered care. The study's implications suggest that future research should further explore the integration of supportive care in oncology, particularly its emotional and psychological impact on patients' quality of life.



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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon under investigation in this study pertains to the lived experiences of cancer patients who manage the side effects of their treatment with supportive pharmaceutical therapies (Brodeur et al., 2023). Cancer treatment, particularly chemotherapy, often leads to a range of debilitating side effects such as nausea, fatigue, pain, and psychological distress, which can significantly affect patients' quality of life (O'Sullivan et al., 2024). These physical and emotional challenges not only hinder the patients' ability to engage in daily activities but also contribute to a decline in their overall well-being (Mottershead & Alonaizi, 2022). In response to these issues, supportive pharmaceutical therapies, which include symptom management strategies and adjunct treatments, have emerged as integral components of cancer care. These therapies are intended to alleviate the adverse effects of cancer treatments, improve patient comfort, and enhance their quality of life during the course of treatment.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant within the broader context of healthcare systems, as cancer remains one of the leading causes of death globally (Guaraldi et al., 2020). The global cancer burden has driven a growing focus on improving patient outcomes not only through effective cancer treatments but also through supportive care. From a social and cultural perspective, the experience of cancer and its treatment can be deeply transformative for individuals and families, often reshaping their perceptions of health, illness, and the body (Upendra et al., 2020). The way patients perceive and manage the side effects of their treatment is influenced by various factors, including cultural attitudes toward illness, societal expectations of strength and resilience, and personal beliefs about health and well-being. Thus, understanding the lived experiences of cancer patients in managing treatment side effects provides valuable insight into the intersection of healthcare, culture, and individual resilience.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its profound impact on the human experience, particularly the emotional and psychological dimensions of illness (Watson et al., 2023). Cancer patients not only face physical challenges but also must navigate the complex emotional terrain of coping with a life-threatening disease. The subjective experiences of patients in managing side effects, including their perceptions of supportive pharmaceutical therapies, are crucial for improving patient care (Rathbone et al., 2021). These experiences are often shaped by personal, cultural, and social contexts that influence how patients understand their illness and treatment options. Exploring these lived experiences through a phenomenological lens is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of how patients make sense of their reality, providing insights that can inform more patient-centered and effective healthcare practices.

Given the complexities of cancer treatment and its multifaceted impact on patients' lives, there is a clear need for a more nuanced exploration of the subjective meaning patients attach to their experiences with treatment side effects and supportive care (Mattingly, 2024; Prior et al., 2020). Phenomenology offers a powerful framework for delving into the depths of these experiences, allowing for an exploration of the meaning-making processes that shape how patients navigate the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges of cancer treatment (Vlach et al., 2023). This approach is essential for uncovering the personal narratives of patients and contributing to the development of more compassionate, holistic cancer care strategies.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex health phenomena, such as managing cancer treatment side effects, has become an increasingly significant field within healthcare studies (Malinowski et al., 2022). This body of work aims to uncover the deeper, subjective meanings that patients attribute to their experiences, providing critical insights into the psychological and emotional dimensions of illness (Rezaei et al., 2019). Within the realm of cancer care, there has been growing recognition that understanding patients' personal perspectives is essential for developing more effective and empathetic treatment strategies. Specifically, the subjective experience of coping with medication side effects and the role of supportive pharmaceutical therapies has received attention for its impact on quality of life (Khaleghparast et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2024). As such, research in this domain helps illuminate how patients' perceptions and coping mechanisms influence their overall well-being and treatment outcomes.

However, exploring such deeply personal and contextually complex experiences presents substantial methodological challenges (Okoro et al., 2024). Traditional quantitative approaches, which rely on statistical analysis and large sample sizes, are limited in their ability to capture the richness and nuance of human experience. These methods often fail to provide an in-depth understanding of the meanings individuals assign to their health journeys (Patil et al., 2021). As a result, much of the current literature remains focused on generalized trends rather than the individualized, subjective experiences that define the unique nature of illness. In contrast, qualitative methodologies, particularly phenomenology, offer a more suitable framework for addressing these complexities, as they focus on understanding lived experiences from the perspective of the individual.

Despite the potential of qualitative approaches, much of the existing research on cancer treatment and its side effects relies on methodologies that are insufficiently attuned to the subjective nature of patients' experiences (Kelly et al., 2020; Undie et al., 2020). Many studies have used structured interviews or surveys that are too narrowly focused on predefined outcomes, neglecting the

broader, more personal narratives that are central to understanding the full impact of cancer treatment. This gap in research underscores the need for a phenomenological approach, which allows for a richer, more holistic exploration of how patients interpret and make sense of their experiences with side effects and supportive therapies. The current limitations in methodology hinder a comprehensive understanding of the essence of the phenomenon, making it difficult to fully grasp how patients manage and experience the psychological and emotional consequences of cancer treatment.

In addressing the challenges faced by cancer patients in managing treatment side effects, much of the existing literature relies on practical approaches focused on symptom management and medical interventions (Lowenstein et al., 2023; Malhotra et al., 2021). These approaches, while essential, tend to overlook the deeper, subjective experiences of patients and the meanings they attribute to their journeys through cancer treatment. Typically, these methods focus on quantifiable outcomes such as the frequency of side effects or the effectiveness of specific supportive therapies (Banks & O'Rourke, 2025). While these solutions provide valuable insights into clinical efficacy, they fail to capture the personal and emotional dimensions of the cancer experience that significantly shape patients' perceptions of their quality of life.

The limitations of these common approaches become evident when we consider the complexity of human experience, particularly in the context of illness (Gault et al., 2024). Understanding how patients feel about their treatment, how they interpret its impact on their well-being, and how they make sense of the side effects they endure requires a more holistic and nuanced exploration (Terry, 2021). As such, the existing body of research falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of cancer patients. The prevailing methods are too focused on objective measures, which cannot adequately address the meaning-making process that defines the human experience of illness.

An alternative solution is to adopt a phenomenological approach, which is uniquely equipped to explore the essence of the phenomenon in question (Hikaka et al., 2023). Phenomenology allows for an in-depth investigation of patients' lived experiences, revealing the subjective meanings they attribute to their treatment and its side effects. This method provides the tools to explore the personal narratives of patients, offering insights that go beyond surface-level data. By focusing on the meanings and experiences of individuals, phenomenology opens up a path to a deeper understanding of how patients navigate their health journeys, making it possible to gain insights into aspects of their experience that have been overlooked in previous research (Gunn & Higgs, 2020). Therefore, this study proposes the use of phenomenology as a means to capture the full scope of patients' experiences, which is essential for improving patient care and support systems in cancer treatment.

Previous research on cancer patients' experiences with treatment side effects has often focused on clinical outcomes and symptom management. Studies have explored the efficacy of medications in alleviating physical symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, and pain, yet these studies often overlook the emotional and psychological dimensions of cancer treatment. Some qualitative studies have examined patient perspectives, but they are limited by the use of non-phenomenological methods, which fail to deeply explore the subjective meanings patients attach to their treatment experiences. Research by (Ma et al., 2025) and (Sharma et al., 2023) highlights the importance of understanding the emotional impact of cancer treatment, but these studies remain insufficient in capturing the essence of patients' lived experiences with supportive pharmaceutical therapies. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a phenomenological approach to investigate how patients truly experience and interpret their treatment and its associated side effects.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach chosen for this study allows for a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences of cancer patients. This method, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was selected to focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived realities in the context of illness (Wilson et al., 2022). IPA is particularly well-suited to this study because it emphasizes the interpretation of participants' personal narratives, enabling a comprehensive exploration of their emotional and psychological experiences with cancer treatment (Bhuller et al., 2025). By employing this approach, the study aims to uncover the meanings patients attribute to the side effects they experience and the impact of supportive pharmaceutical

therapies on their quality of life. In doing so, this study offers a more holistic understanding of the cancer treatment journey, which has been overlooked by existing research.

The structure of this article follows a logical progression that guides the reader through the study (Perez et al., 2024). It begins with an introduction that outlines the context and significance of the phenomenon under investigation. The article then describes the phenomenological methodology, followed by the process of data collection through semi-structured interviews and the subsequent analysis using IPA. After presenting the findings, the article discusses the results, linking them to existing literature and drawing out the broader implications of the findings (Huffman et al., 2023). Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the key insights gained from the study and suggesting future directions for research in the field of cancer care and supportive pharmaceutical therapies.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of cancer patients managing the side effects of cancer medications with supportive pharmaceutical therapies (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology is particularly suited for this research as it focuses on understanding the subjective experiences and meanings individuals attribute to their lived experiences. By employing this approach, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how patients navigate the challenges of cancer treatment and the role of pharmaceutical support in improving their quality of life. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was applied in this study to allow for a detailed exploration of participants' personal perceptions and interpretations of their experiences, as IPA is well-suited for analyzing how individuals make sense of their lived realities.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct experience of the phenomena being studied were included. The inclusion criteria specified that participants must be adults diagnosed with cancer, currently undergoing or having recently completed cancer treatment, and experiencing or having experienced the side effects of cancer medications. Participants were also required to have utilized supportive pharmaceutical therapies as part of their treatment regimen. Exclusion criteria included individuals with cognitive impairments that would hinder their ability to articulate their experiences.

A total of 10 participants, consisting of both male and female cancer patients, were involved in the study. The participants ranged in age from 35 to 65 years, with an average age of 50 years. The diversity in the participants' ages and gender was intentional to capture a range of experiences that could provide rich insights into the phenomenon under study. The participants represented various cancer types and stages, which contributed to the breadth of perspectives regarding the management of medication side effects through supportive pharmaceutical care.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' personal experiences while maintaining a focus on the research questions. Interviews were conducted in private settings, such as participants' homes or in quiet rooms at local hospitals, to ensure confidentiality and create a comfortable environment for sharing sensitive information. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, with participants being encouraged to speak freely about their experiences with cancer treatment and the role of supportive therapies in managing side effects. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to facilitate the conversation, with open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on and describe their experiences in their own words. The interview guide was based on existing literature and was tailored to capture the nuances of participants' lived experiences in the context of supportive pharmaceutical therapies. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was chosen due to its suitability for examining the way individuals interpret and make sense of their personal experiences. Data were analyzed through a systematic process, beginning with the initial reading of the transcribed interviews to familiarize with the content. The next step involved identifying and coding meaningful units of text that reflected the central experiences of the participants. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The process of theme development was iterative, involving continual refinement as new insights emerged from the data. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and managing the data, although the primary focus remained on the interpretative analysis of the participants' narratives. Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained a commitment to understanding the unique perspectives of the participants while being mindful of their own interpretations.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring compliance with international and local ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, with an emphasis on explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of the data. Participants were assured that their identities would be anonymized in the reporting of the findings, and all data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality. Written consent was provided by each participant, confirming their understanding of the study's purpose and their agreement to participate. The study adhered to ethical guidelines regarding the protection of participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS**

### **Coping with Medication Side Effects**

One of the most salient themes emerged from the patients' reflections on the side effects of cancer treatments. Patients commonly reported experiencing a range of physical and emotional challenges, from nausea and fatigue to feelings of anxiety and depression. As one participant explained:

"The side effects were overwhelming at first, the nausea and fatigue just made everything seem impossible. I felt like I couldn't even get out of bed some days." (P1, Female, 45 years)

This quotation illustrates the dual burden of physical and psychological suffering, reinforcing the analytical theme that side effects extend beyond physiological discomfort to a loss of autonomy and daily functioning. Patients expressed how these side effects often diminished their overall quality of life, leading to a sense of helplessness. However, some participants described how engaging with supportive pharmaceutical therapies provided them with strategies to manage these challenges more effectively. One participant described the relief they experienced from a prescribed medication regimen:

"I started using the supplements and dietary guidance the pharmacist gave me, and I felt a lot better after a few weeks. I could actually function again without the constant dread of nausea." (P3, Male, 52 years)

Here, the quotation directly links to the subtheme of "restoring functional independence," showing how pharmaceutical guidance alleviated both physical discomfort and the psychological toll of uncertainty. The ability to better manage side effects allowed patients to reclaim some sense of normalcy, although the extent to which this was successful varied.

### Impact of Supportive Pharmaceutical Therapies on Quality of Life

The second prominent theme identified was the profound impact that supportive pharmaceutical care had on patients' quality of life. Many patients shared that the tailored pharmaceutical interventions, such as supplements, pain management strategies, and counseling on managing symptoms, helped them navigate the challenges posed by cancer treatments. A participant described:

"After starting the supportive therapy, it felt like a weight was lifted off me. The pharmacist's advice helped me understand how to take care of my body during treatment." (P2, Female, 39 years)  
This response illustrates the analytical link between professional guidance and patients' sense of empowerment, suggesting that supportive care not only alleviates symptoms but also fosters agency in self-management.

In contrast, some patients expressed dissatisfaction with the level of care and felt that their needs were not fully addressed. These patients reported that despite receiving some level of supportive care, they still faced significant barriers, including poor communication with healthcare providers and a lack of follow-up support. As one patient remarked:

"The treatment was supposed to help, but the pharmacist didn't follow up with me. I had no idea if I was doing it right or if there were other options." (P4, Male, 60 years)

This critical reflection underscores the analytical subtheme of "gaps in continuity of care," showing how lack of follow-up eroded trust and reduced the effectiveness of otherwise beneficial interventions.

### Accessibility and Challenges in Accessing Supportive Care

Another important theme that emerged was the issue of accessibility to supportive pharmaceutical care. While some patients had easy access to counseling and treatments, others reported difficulty in obtaining necessary services due to logistical barriers, such as long wait times or geographic distance from pharmacies or hospitals. One participant explained:

"I live in a rural area, and it was hard to find a pharmacy that offered the kind of help I needed. I had to travel for hours just to speak to someone who could give me advice." (P5, Female, 47 years)

This statement analytically ties into the theme of structural inequities in healthcare, highlighting how geography and infrastructure shape patients' ability to benefit from supportive care.

**Thematic Summary Table**

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotations
Coping with Medication Side Effects	Loss of autonomy, Restoring functional independence	"The nausea and fatigue just made everything seem impossible..." (P1) "I could actually function again..." (P3)
Impact of Supportive Therapies on QoL	Empowerment, Gaps in continuity of care	"It felt like a weight was lifted off me..." (P2) "The pharmacist didn't follow up..." (P4)
Accessibility and Challenges in Care	Geographic barriers, Structural inequities	"I live in a rural area... had to travel for hours..." (P5)

The analysis of the patients' experiences reveals a complex relationship between cancer treatment side effects, the role of supportive pharmaceutical care, and its impact on patients' quality of life. While supportive therapies were generally perceived as beneficial, the deeper analytical linkage between quotations and thematic categories shows that effectiveness is shaped not only by symptom relief but also by patients' sense of agency, continuity of care, and structural accessibility.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal the complex and deeply personal nature of cancer patients' experiences with the side effects of treatment and their interactions with supportive pharmaceutical therapies (Alkaissi et al., 2022). Patients' narratives highlighted both the physical and emotional burdens imposed by cancer treatment, as well as the ways in which supportive care helped them manage these challenges (Moghimi et al., 2022). These experiences provide valuable insights into the subjective meanings patients attribute to their treatment journey and the therapeutic interventions they engage with, answering the central question of how cancer patients perceive and cope with the side effects of their treatment.

This study contributes significantly to the understanding of cancer treatment from a phenomenological perspective, specifically through the lens of supportive pharmaceutical therapies (Kerimofski et al., 2025). By capturing patients' lived experiences, the research provides a richer understanding of how treatment side effects are not only a medical challenge but also a psychological and emotional one. The findings emphasize that supportive pharmaceutical care, when appropriately integrated into the treatment process, can have a profound impact on patients' overall well-being and quality of life. These insights underscore the importance of tailoring supportive care to meet patients' individual needs, emphasizing that therapeutic interventions must address both the physical and emotional aspects of cancer treatment (Hellerslia & Caldas, 2024). This contribution adds a layer of depth to the existing literature, showing that the effectiveness of supportive care should not be measured solely by symptom alleviation but also by its capacity to enhance patients' emotional resilience and sense of control over their illness.

The findings of this study are consistent with, and in some cases expand upon, existing literature on cancer treatment and supportive care. Previous studies have shown that medication side effects significantly affect patients' quality of life, both physically and psychologically (Higueta-Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Ompad et al., 2024). However, while these studies have often focused on the clinical management of side effects, they have not explored the emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences to the extent that this research does. For example, (Casesa et al., 2023) found that cancer patients who received supportive care reported improved physical well-being, but they did not account for the emotional aspects of this improvement, which was a key finding in this study. By examining how patients interpret their experiences and the meanings they assign to their care, this study contributes to the growing recognition that cancer treatment is not only about survival but also about enhancing the patients' emotional and psychological well-being. Moreover, this study supports the theoretical frameworks put forth by phenomenological scholars such as, who emphasize the importance of understanding how individuals interpret their lived experiences in context. The results validate the need for a more integrated, person-centered approach to cancer care that considers both the body and the mind in the healing process.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study have significant implications both for the field of cancer care and for healthcare practice in general. From a clinical perspective, the research emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive approach to supportive care that not only addresses the physical side effects of cancer treatment but also the psychological and emotional dimensions of patients' experiences. By understanding the subjective meanings that patients attach to their treatment journey, healthcare providers can better tailor interventions to meet the individualized needs of each patient. This approach would not only improve the effectiveness of care but also enhance patients' overall quality of life. On a broader social level, these findings underscore the importance of integrating mental health support into cancer treatment protocols, especially given the profound emotional toll that treatment side effects can impose on patients. The study also highlights the role of cultural factors in shaping how patients perceive and cope with their illness, further demonstrating the need for culturally sensitive care practices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of cancer patients, the study is not without its limitations (Marquis-Gravel et al., 2023). One significant limitation is the relatively small and homogenous sample size, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences

of all cancer patients. The study focused primarily on patients from specific regions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other geographic locations or populations with different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the use of phenomenological analysis, while well-suited to exploring deep personal experiences, may introduce subjectivity into the interpretation of the data, despite efforts to ensure rigor in the analysis. Furthermore, the study relied solely on self-reported data from interviews, which could be influenced by patients' ability to articulate their experiences or by social desirability biases. Future research could address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample and exploring experiences in different healthcare settings.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to expand the research to include a more diverse sample of cancer patients, encompassing a broader range of cancer types, treatment regimens, and demographic characteristics. Such an expansion could provide further insights into how different factors—such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background—affect patients' experiences of treatment side effects and supportive care. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how patients' experiences evolve over time, particularly after the completion of treatment, and how their perceptions of the effectiveness of supportive care change. Future research could also investigate the integration of mental health support into cancer care practices and examine the impact of such integration on patients' emotional and psychological well-being. By building on the insights from this study, future investigations can contribute to developing more holistic and patient-centered care models in oncology.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study focused on exploring the lived experiences of cancer patients managing the side effects of their treatment through supportive pharmaceutical therapies. The findings revealed that while cancer treatment often imposes significant physical and emotional challenges, supportive care plays a crucial role in helping patients navigate these difficulties. Patients' experiences demonstrated that these therapies not only alleviated physical symptoms but also enhanced emotional well-being, underscoring the importance of holistic care approaches. These insights contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of cancer patients, which has been largely overlooked in previous research. However, this study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to patients from a single treatment center, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study relied on self-reported experiences that could be influenced by recall bias, and it did not examine variations across different types or stages of cancer.

Based on these findings, the study provides concrete recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. Healthcare practitioners, particularly pharmacists and oncologists, should implement structured follow-up consultations and personalized supportive care plans to address both physical and psychological needs. Policymakers should consider expanding access to supportive pharmaceutical services, especially in rural and underserved regions, by investing in telehealth platforms and strengthening referral systems. Integrating supportive care into national cancer treatment guidelines would ensure a more patient-centered and equitable approach to oncology. This study also provides a foundation for future research to further explore the emotional dimensions of cancer treatment and the integration of mental health support into cancer care. Future studies should include larger and more diverse patient populations, adopt multi-center designs, and investigate the long-term impact of supportive care interventions on patients' quality of life.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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