



Sleepless from the Get Go: Sleep Problems Prior to Initiating Cancer Treatment

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Abstract

Purpose Cancer patients are likely to experience sleep problems. Understanding their perception of sleep problems is important as subjective symptom experience is associated with treatment-seeking behavior. We explored the prevalence of sleep problems and its correlates in a large sample of cancer patients at an important but understudied stage of their cancer journey: prior to initiating treatment.

Methods Cancer patients (5702) (67.5% female; 76.9% White; 23.0% Hispanic), following diagnosis and prior to initiating cancer treatment, completed an electronic screening instrument. Patients across eight different cancer diagnoses (breast, gastrointestinal, gynecological, head and neck, hematological, lung, prostate, urinary) rated their sleep problems on a five-point scale, with those reporting “severe” or “very severe” sleep problems classified as having high sleep problems.

Results Overall, 12.5% of patients reported high sleep problems. Across diagnoses, the proportion of patients reporting high sleep problems ranged from 4.3 to 13.8%, with prostate cancer patients least likely and gastrointestinal cancer patients most likely to report high sleep problems. Older age, having a partner, higher education, and higher household income were associated with a lower likelihood of experiencing sleep problems. Being female, Black, Hispanic, and reporting anxiety or depression was associated with an increased likelihood of sleep problems.

Conclusions A sizeable proportion of cancer patients experience significant problems with their sleep before any treatment has occurred. This clinical issue cannot be ignored as treatment is likely to worsen existing sleep problems. Oncology providers should routinely screen for sleep-related problems. Identifying and treating patients for sleep problems during a vulnerable period early in their cancer trajectory should be an essential component of clinical care.

Keywords Sleep problems · Sleep dysfunction · Sleep disturbances · Cancer patient · Oncology

Introduction

A cancer diagnosis can be one of the most stressful times of an individual’s life [1, 2]. The pre-treatment period for a cancer patient may be one of the most psychologically difficult, as they are faced with understanding their diagnosis, making important treatment decisions, and confronting the possibility of their mortality, all within a relatively brief window of time [3–5]. These

stressors may be likely to create sleep problems, which are already common in the general population. Estimates suggest that up to half of adults have a sleep complaint, with women, older adults, and those from a lower socioeconomic background more likely to struggle with their sleep [6–8], and mixed findings regarding ethnic differences [9, 10]. Chronic sleep problems are associated with a host of physical and psychosocial health outcomes including increased infection risk, pain, fatigue, depression, poorer quality of life, and mortality [11–15] in a population already at increased risk for co-morbidities.

Beyond the absence or presence of a symptom, it is also important to understand the patient’s perception of how much of a problem that particular symptom may be. The experience of a problem is an important predictor of whether they will seek medical treatment to address that symptom [16]. This is notable in the context of sleep-related issues because they are often overlooked by both patients and medical providers, viewed as a

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“normal” response to a recent cancer diagnosis and merely a temporary issue [17]. Consequently, sleep disorders are consistently under-diagnosed in the oncology setting [18, 19]. Without routine screening and diagnosis, patients are not provided with the opportunity to receive evidence-based interventions for their poor sleep [20], resulting in ongoing sleep problems that can persist through active therapy [21–25] and well into cancer survivorship [14, 26–28].

Our understanding of sleep in the context of cancer is limited by several key factors. First, less than 10% of sleep disorders research in cancer populations has been conducted during the critical phase prior to treatment initiation [29], with work suggesting that this period may be the highest risk phase for sleep problems [30]. Next, limited research in cancer patients has specifically inquired about how much of a problem patients are experiencing with their sleep. Finally, though the prevalence of sleep problems varies across cancer diagnoses [25, 31], the preponderance of research has been conducted among breast cancer patients. There is a need to improve our understanding of sleep in other patient groups [29]. To address these important limitations of our current literature, we sought to improve our insight into the prevalence and correlates of sleep problems following cancer diagnosis and prior to treatment initiation. To the best of our knowledge, this study sample is one of the largest in which sleep problems among cancer patients have been studied. Participants in this sample are diverse with respect to demographics and have been diagnosed with eight of the most commonly diagnosed cancers in adults.

Methods

During a routine clinical visit prior to starting treatment, patients were asked to complete a biopsychosocial problem-related screening instrument on a touch-screen device (*SupportScreen*) [32] that is part of standard of clinical outpatient care. Data collected from this instrument were examined for this cross-sectional study of 5702 adult cancer patients at a National Cancer Institute designated comprehensive cancer center in the USA between 2009 and 2016. For inclusion into the study, participants were a minimum age of 18, had not yet received active cancer therapy, were outpatient status, and were able to complete the survey in English, Spanish, or Chinese. Patients were identified in the hematological malignancy, gastrointestinal cancer, head/neck cancer, prostate cancer, gynecologic cancer, lung cancer, urinary cancer, or prostate cancer clinics. This study was approved by the City of Hope Institutional Review Board.

Sample

In the sample, there were more females than males (68.2%), with the majority between the ages of 40–64 years (56.7%). Though 77.0% of the sample was White, there was minority representation with 5.6% Blacks and 17.3% Asians. Most participants identified as non-Hispanic (77.0%), were married (64.2%), and had at least some college education (71.8%). A substantial proportion (44.0%) of our sample reported having a household income of less than \$40,000/year.

Measures

The 53-item *You, Your Family, and the City of Hope are a Team* screening instrument was developed based upon patient and family input, a comprehensive review of the scientific literature, and clinical experience. Further information about measure development and validation has been previously published [33–37]. Patients are prompted to report ratings on a five-point scale from 1 (Not a problem) to 5 (Very severe problem) in response to the question “How much of a problem is this for you?” regarding a range of common physical, practical, social, psychological, nutritional, physical rehabilitation, and spiritual problems encountered by patients with cancer. Specifically for this study, patient responses to the question How much of a problem is this for you? for three items were examined: (1) “sleeping,” (2) “feeling anxious or fearful,” (3) “feeling down or depressed.” Patients who indicated that a symptom was either a “severe” or “very severe” problem were classified as having “high problems,” and those who reported “not a problem,” or a “mild” or “moderate” problem were classified as having “non-high problems.” This classification mirrors the clinical setting where the screening tool is utilized. A medical provider (e.g., physician, nurse, social worker etc.) is automatically notified if a patient reports either severe or very severe for a specific item so that they may be triaged. Demographic characteristics were obtained from the survey and the patient’s electronic medical record.

Data Analysis

The frequency with which patients reported sleep problems on the five-point scale was tabulated first across all cancer diagnoses and then separately for each specific cancer diagnosis. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the proportions of patients endorsing high and non-high problems for each cancer diagnosis. Next, chi-square tests of independence were conducted comparing patients endorsing high or non-high sleep problems with each demographic (age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, education level, and household income) and psychological (single-item

report of problems with anxiety and with depression) variable, with odds ratios calculated via logistic regression. Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis to understand the overall associations between sleep and all possible covariates with a single comprehensive logistic regression model including all demographic and psychological variables. Missing data was handled using list-wise deletion for all analyses. For all analyses, the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 was used, using a two-tailed p value $\leq .05$ to designate statistical significance.

Results

Of 5702 cancer patients, 713 (12.5%) reported that they were experiencing high problems with sleep (Table 1). The range for patients indicating high problems with sleep was between 4.6 and 13.8%, with independence tests demonstrating that prostate cancer patients were least likely to report high problems (4.6%; $p < .001$) compared to all other diagnoses. Among the remaining seven cancer diagnoses, between 11.3 and 13.8% of patients reported having high problems; differences between these diagnoses were not statistically significant. In the whole sample, independence tests identified statistically significant associations between demographic (age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, education level, and household income) and health-related (single-item report of problems with anxiety and with depression) correlates of sleep problems (Table 2). Covariates positively associated with high sleep problems in the overall sample included being female (OR = 1.30; $p < .01$), Black (OR = 1.86; $p < .001$), Hispanic (OR = 1.56; $p < .001$), and reporting high problems associated with anxiety (OR = 6.25; $p < .001$) and depression (OR = 9.09; $p < .001$). Further, women were more likely to report experiencing high problems associated with anxiety (OR = 1.59; $p < .001$) and depression (OR = 1.92; $p < .001$). Similarly, being 65 years of age or older (OR = 0.65; $p < .001$), married/partnered (OR = 0.78; $p < .01$), having some college education (OR = 0.62; $p < .001$) or an advanced degree (OR = 0.43; $p < .001$), and having an income of \$40,000–100,000/year (OR = 0.40; $p < .01$) or greater than \$100,000/year (OR = 0.64; $p < .001$) were associated with a lower likelihood of reporting high problems with sleep. A logistical regression model with all potential covariates revealed that education, household income, anxiety, and depression remained significantly associated with sleep problems even after adjusting for other variables (Table 3).

A detailed view of the tests of independence between demographic and health covariates of high/non-high sleep problems separately by individual diagnosis can be seen in the Tables 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11.

Table 1 Patient responses to “How much of a problem is this for you? Sleeping” by site of cancer diagnosis ($N = 5702$)

	Cancer diagnosis									
	All cancer diagnoses ($N = 5702$)	Hematological ($n = 416$)	Gastrointestinal ($n = 801$)	Head/neck ($n = 344$)	Prostate ($n = 469$)	Gynecologic ($n = 648$)	Lung ($n = 524$)	Urinary ($n = 332$)	Breast ($n = 2168$)	
Not a problem	35.9%	33.8%	35.7%	40.4%	50.6%	33.2%	31.9%	33.6%	33.8%	
Mild problem	26.1%	28.3%	26.0%	26.5%	24.6%	27.8%	26.0%	22.7%	26.0%	
Moderate problem	25.6%	24.4%	24.4%	21.8%	20.5%	26.5%	29.2%	30.0%	26.7%	
Severe problem	9.1%	10.4%	9.9%	8.1%	2.6%	9.8%	7.5%	11.2%	10.1%	
Very severe problem	3.4%	3.1%	3.9%	3.2%	1.7%	2.8%	5.4%	2.4%	3.4%	

Table 2 Demographic and psychological characteristics for all cancer patients by high/non-high sleep problems ($N = 5702$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	5667			.00	
18–39	391	49 (12.5%)	342 (87.5%)		Ref
40–64	3216	461 (14.3%)	2755(85.7%)		1.32
≥ 65	2060	199 (9.7%)	1861 (90.3%)		0.65***
<i>Gender</i>	5587			.00	
Male	1779	188 (10.6%)	1591 (89.4%)		Ref
Female	3808	513 (13.5%)	3295 (86.5%)		1.30**
<i>Race</i>	4917			.00	
White	3788	454 (12.0%)	3334 (88.0%)		Ref
Black	276	56 (20.3%)	220 (79.7%)		1.86***
Asian	853	86 (10.1%)	767 (89.9%)		0.85
<i>Ethnicity</i>	5134			.00	
Non-Hispanic	3954	447 (11.3%)	3507 (88.7%)		Ref
Hispanic	1180	196 (16.6%)	984 (83.4%)		1.56***
<i>Marital status</i>	5283			.00	
Not Married (single/widowed/divorced)	1921	277 (14.4%)	1644 (85.6%)		Ref
Married/life partner	3392	389 (11.6%)	2973 (88.4%)		0.78**
<i>Education</i>	5457			.00	
\leq High school diploma	1538	248 (16.1%)	1290 (83.9%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	2892	349 (12.1%)	2543 (87.9%)		0.62***
$>$ 4-year degree	1027	80 (7.8%)	947 (92.2%)		0.43***
<i>Annual household income</i>	4132			.00	
$<$ \$40,000	1818	297 (16.3%)	1521 (83.7%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	1362	151 (11.1%)	1211 (88.9%)		0.40**
$>$ \$100,000	952	518 (12.5%)	3614 (87.5%)		0.64***
<i>Anxiety</i>	5537			.00	
Low problem	5023	484 (9.6%)	4939 (90.4%)		Ref
High problem	514	209 (40.7%)	305 (59.3%)		6.25***
<i>Depression</i>	2310			.00	
Low problem	2116	206 (9.7%)	1910 (90.3%)		Ref
High problem	194	96 (49.5%)	98 (50.5%)		9.09***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In summary, statistically significant differences were seen between high/non-high sleep problems and age only for those diagnosed with head/neck and breast cancer. For gender, females diagnosed with hematological malignancy were statistically more likely to report high problems with sleep, but not in other cancer diagnoses that affect both genders. Blacks consistently reported high sleep problems compared with Whites, with statistically significant differences seen in all diagnoses, with the exception of hematological malignancy and lung cancer. Hispanics diagnosed with hematological malignancy, gynecologic cancer, and breast cancer were more likely to report high sleep problems. Being married or having a life partner was associated

with a statistically significantly lower likelihood of reporting high problems for those diagnosed with gastrointestinal cancer and head/neck cancer only. Statistically significant relationships between higher education and a lower rate of high sleep problems were only seen in those with a gastrointestinal, lung, urinary, and breast cancer diagnoses. A higher household income was associated with lower rates of high problems in those with a gastrointestinal, head/neck, gynecologic, urinary, and breast cancer diagnosis. Finally, in every individual cancer diagnosis, patients reporting high problems with anxiety or depression were more likely to also report high problems with their sleep.

Table 3 Logistic regression model incorporating all potential covariates ($n = 1339$)

	<i>n</i> high sleep problem (%)	<i>n</i> non-high sleep problem (%)	Odds ratio
Age			
18–39	13 (7.9%)	70 (6.0%)	Ref
40–64	113 (68.5%)	679 (57.8%)	0.77
≥ 65	39 (23.6%)	425 (36.2%)	0.50
Gender			
Male	47 (28.5%)	451 (38.4%)	Ref
Female	118 (71.5%)	723 (61.6%)	1.06
Race			
White	131 (79.4%)	955 (81.3%)	Ref
Black	18 (10.9%)	70 (6.0%)	1.41
Asian	16 (9.7%)	149 (12.7%)	0.60
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic	119 (72.1%)	905 (77.1%)	Ref
Hispanic	46 (27.9%)	269 (22.9%)	0.66
Marital status			
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	74 (44.8%)	403 (34.3%)	Ref
Married/life partner	91 (55.2%)	771 (65.7%)	1.08
Education			
≤ High school diploma	64 (38.8%)	336 (28.6%)	Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	88 (53.3%)	598 (50.9%)	1.01
> 4-year degree	13 (7.9%)	240 (20.4%)	0.43*
Annual household income			
< \$40,000	107 (64.8%)	497 (42.3%)	Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	38 (23.0%)	389 (33.1%)	0.66
> \$100,000	20 (12.1%)	288 (24.5%)	0.48*
Anxiety			
Low problem	115 (69.7%)	1109 (94.5%)	Ref
High problem	50 (30.3%)	65 (5.5%)	2.92***
Depression			
Low problem	118 (71.5%)	1130 (96.3%)	Ref
High problem	47 (28.5%)	44 (3.7%)	4.63***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The prevalence of experiencing sleep problems prior to initiating active cancer treatment is considerable across multiple diagnoses. These patients have not started to receive the intensive therapies designed to treat their cancer, yet are already reporting that they are experiencing problems with their sleep. Even though issues with sleep are associated with many health consequences, they are commonly overlooked by healthcare clinicians in the oncology setting [18, 19], and both patients and providers are not aware that highly effective interventions tailored for cancer patients exist (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia) [20, 38]. However, when compared to the general population,

there is some cause for optimism. There has been increasing interest in studying sleep in oncology populations, and because cancer patients are actively engaged within a healthcare system, there is an increased chance that they may receive a sleep evaluation and treatment for their sleep problems. Our findings demonstrate that there are important demographic (age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, education level, and household income) and health-related (anxiety and depression) factors which can help to guide clinicians and researchers in identifying those at greatest risk for reporting sleep problems. Furthermore, our logistical regression model suggests that those with co-morbid concerns about anxiety and depression are at particular risk for sleep problems, even after controlling

Table 4 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with hematological malignancy by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 409$)

	No.	<i>n</i> high sleep problem (%)	<i>n</i> non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	409			.61	
18–39	82	14 (17.1%)	68 (82.9%)		Ref
40–64	203	26 (12.8%)	177 (87.2%)		0.71
≥65	124	16 (12.9%)	108 (87.1%)		0.72
<i>Gender</i>	400			.69	
Male	199	25 (12.6%)	174 (87.4%)		Ref
Female	201	28 (13.9%)	173 (86.1%)		1.13**
<i>Race</i>	369			.15	
White	296	41 (13.9%)	255 (78.9%)		Ref
Black	20	0 (0.0%)	20 (100.0%)		0.00
Asian	53	5 (10.9%)	48 (90.6%)		0.65
<i>Ethnicity</i>	379			.01	
Non-Hispanic	298	32 (10.7%)	266 (89.3%)		Ref
Hispanic	81	18 (22.2%)	63 (77.8%)		2.38**
<i>Marital status</i>	381			.32	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	141	16 (11.3%)	125 (88.7%)		Ref
Married/life partner	240	36 (15.0%)	204 (85.0%)		1.38
<i>Education</i>	396			.42	
≤High school diploma	73	9 (12.3%)	64 (87.7%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	215	33 (15.3%)	185 (84.7%)		1.29
>4-year degree	108	11 (10.2%)	97 (89.8%)		0.81
<i>Annual household income</i>	294			.19	
<\$40,000	109	19 (17.4%)	90 (82.6%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	88	10 (11.4%)	78 (88.6%)		0.61
>\$100,000	97	9 (9.3%)	88 (90.7%)		0.48
<i>Anxiety</i>	386			.00	
Low problem	369	47 (12.7%)	322 (87.3%)		Ref
High problem	17	7 (41.2%)	10 (58.8%)		4.80**
<i>Depression</i>	108			.01	
Low problem	104	10 (9.6%)	94 (90.4%)		Ref
High problem	4	2 (50.0%)	2 (50.0%)		9.40*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

for demographic variables. Patients who are experiencing significant sleep problems may be more receptive to referrals to evidence-based treatment, which can have a positive health impact for patients at risk for decrements to their health and quality of life as a result of their upcoming cancer therapy.

A direct comparison of our findings with other samples is made difficult by virtue of the different definitions for sleep disruption used in various studies, which ranged from questions about overall sleep quality to those who met diagnostic criteria for insomnia disorder [17, 31, 39]. In our study, had we classified patients in our sample with “moderate” sleep problems as having high sleep problems, the proportions in our findings

would have differed. Our decision to categorize patients reporting severe or very severe sleep problems as having high sleep problems was because those with more severe insomnia impairments are more likely to seek treatment [40]. There is a known discrepancy between the presence of a sleep problem (e.g., frequent night awakenings) and a patient’s perception that their sleep is a problem—prior literature has demonstrated that over 20% of adults who were experiencing insomnia symptoms still reported that they were satisfied with their sleep [41]. The subjective nature of sleep disturbances (i.e., it is possible that some patients simply “got used to” living with a sleep problem and no longer consider their poor sleep a significant issue) may help to explain

Table 5 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with gastrointestinal cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 795$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	795			.18	
18–39	33	7 (21.2%)	26 (78.8%)		Ref
40–64	410	62 (15.1%)	348 (84.9%)		0.66
≥ 65	352	41 (11.6%)	311 (88.4%)		0.49
<i>Gender</i>	790			.44	
Male	393	51 (13.0%)	342 (87.0%)		Ref
Female	397	59 (14.9%)	338 (85.1%)		1.17
<i>Race</i>	678			.02	
White	479	67 (14.0%)	412 (86.0%)		Ref
Black	25	18 (28.0%)	18 (72.0%)		2.39*
Asian	174	16 (9.2%)	158 (90.8%)		0.62
<i>Ethnicity</i>	721			.35	
Non-Hispanic	544	71 (13.1%)	473 (86.9%)		Ref
Hispanic	177	28 (15.8%)	149 (84.2%)		1.25
<i>Marital status</i>	761			.17	
Not Married (single/widowed/divorced)	243	49 (20.2%)	194 (79.8%)		Ref
Married/life partner	518	58 (11.2%)	490 (88.8%)		0.50**
<i>Education</i>	771			.00	
\leq High school diploma	275	46 (16.7%)	229 (83.3%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	375	50 (13.3%)	325 (86.7%)		0.77
$>$ 4-year degree	121	12 (9.9%)	109 (90.1%)		0.55*
<i>Annual household income</i>	586			.00	
$<$ \$40,000	295	61 (20.7%)	243 (79.3%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	188	22 (11.7%)	166 (88.3%)		0.51*
$>$ \$100,000	103	6 (5.8%)	97 (94.2%)		0.24**
<i>Anxiety</i>	778			.00	
Low Problem	711	79 (11.1%)	632 (88.9%)		Ref
High Problem	67	30 (44.8%)	37 (55.2%)		6.49***
<i>Depression</i>	315			.00	
Low Problem	280	39 (13.9%)	241 (86.1%)		Ref
High Problem	35	15 (42.9%)	20 (57.1%)		4.64***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

why cancer patients are unlikely to discuss sleep issues with their oncologists [14] and why increasing the awareness among patients about common sleep disorders and their health consequences could be an important focus for future interventions.

Consistent with insomnia prevalence in the general population [42], perceptions of high sleep problems in our sample were more common in women. Within the general population, the risk ratio for female versus male insomnia prevalence is 1.41 [42], which is similar to our finding that women were 1.40 times more likely to report high problems with their sleep. It has been previously suggested that the increased likelihood of sleep problems in women may be the result of factors

including the increased prevalence of psychiatric disorders (specifically depression and anxiety) in women [43, 44] and the higher probability that women will report somatic symptoms such as sleep disturbances [45, 46]. Our findings support these hypotheses: women were more likely to perceive experiencing high problems associated with anxiety and depression. Further, the strongest correlates of sleep problems in our sample were the report of either anxiety or depressive problems, across demographic groups, which is consistent with the general population [47]. This is a commonly seen symptom cluster within oncology populations [24], and sleep/anxiety/depression can serve to exacerbate or cause one another [48]. The high rate of sleep problems in women

Table 6 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with head and neck cancer by high/non-high sleep problem (n = 344)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	344			.00	
18–39	25	7 (28.0%)	18 (72.0%)		Ref
40–64	184	27 (14.7%)	157 (85.3%)		0.44
≥65	135	5 (3.7%)	130 (96.3%)		0.10***
<i>Gender</i>	341			.67	
Male	246	27 (11.0%)	219 (89.0%)		Ref
Female	95	12 (12.6%)	83 (87.4%)		1.17
<i>Race</i>	312			.08	
White	255	25 (9.8%)	230 (90.2%)		Ref
Black	9	3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)		4.60*
Asian	48	6 (12.5%)	42 (87.5%)		1.31
<i>Ethnicity</i>	316			.13	
Non-Hispanic	273	29 (10.6%)	244 (89.4%)		Ref
Hispanic	43	8 (18.6%)	35 (81.4%)		1.92
<i>Marital status</i>	309			.06	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	104	16 (15.4%)	88 (84.6%)		Ref
Married/ life partner	205	17 (8.3%)	188 (91.7%)		0.50*
<i>Education</i>	332			.85	
≤High school diploma	96	12 (12.5%)	84 (87.5%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	167	18 (10.8%)	149 (89.2%)		0.85
>4-year degree	69	9 (13.0%)	60 (87.0%)		1.05
<i>Annual household income</i>	257			.00	
<\$40,000	112	21 (18.8%)	91 (81.3%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	83	3 (3.6%)	80 (96.4%)		0.16**
>\$100,000	62	3 (4.8%)	59 (95.2%)		0.22*
<i>Anxiety</i>	328			.00	
Low problem	284	22 (7.7%)	262 (92.3%)		Ref
High problem	44	15 (34.1%)	29 (65.9%)		6.16***
<i>Depression</i>	83			.00	
Low problem	73	5 (6.8%)	68 (93.2%)		Ref
High problem	10	5 (50.0%)	5 (50.0%)		13.60**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

before they have received any cancer therapy is particularly concerning as cancer treatments can cause women to experience menopausal symptoms (e.g., hot flashes) [49] which can further impair sleep [50].

The results we present on race and ethnicity are consistent with current knowledge from the general population: Blacks and Hispanics experience poorer sleep than other racial groups [51–56], while Asians are less likely to experience sleep issues [57, 58]. Our understanding of why some minority populations sleep worse than others is limited and requires further research [59]. These results emphasize the need to discuss sleep-related issues with Black and Hispanic cancer patients in the clinical setting, as they are likely to be experiencing sleep problems.

Overall reductions in role demands (e.g., employment, childrearing, etc.) and the associated decrease in general stress may help to explain our novel findings with respect to the association between age, race, and ethnicity; marital status; education level; and household income with sleep problems. First, the prevalence of sleep problems by age groups in our sample differs from what is generally seen in the general population. Epidemiological studies have suggested that the likelihood of sleep disorders, such as insomnia, is associated with increasing age [60, 61]. In our sample, the lowest rates of sleep problems were reported by those 65 years of age and older, while the middle-aged patients (40–64 years) reported the highest rates of sleep problems. Other studies have identified a similar peak around the fourth decade of

Table 7 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with prostate cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 468$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	468			.27	
18–39	2	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)		N/A
40–64	178	11 (6.2%)	167 (93.8%)		
≥ 65	288	9 (3.1%)	279 (96.9%)		
<i>Gender</i>	N/A				
Male					
Female					
<i>Race</i>	411			.00	
White	348	7 (2.0%)	341 (98.0%)		Ref
Black	28	5 (17.9%)	23 (82.1%)		10.59***
Asian	35	2 (5.7%)	33 (94.3%)		2.95
<i>Ethnicity</i>	417			.28	
Non-Hispanic	348	11 (3.2%)	337 (96.8%)		Ref
Hispanic	69	4 (5.8%)	65 (94.2%)		1.89
<i>Marital status</i>	435			.67	
Not Married (single/widowed/divorced)	80	4 (5.0%)	76 (95.0%)		Ref
Married/ life partner	355	14 (3.9%)	341 (96.1%)		0.78
<i>Education</i>	458			.39	
\leq High school diploma	61	4 (6.6%)	57 (93.4%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	247	12 (4.9%)	235 (95.1%)		0.73
$>$ 4- year degree	150	4 (2.7%)	146 (97.3%)		0.39
<i>Annual household income</i>	339			.70	
$<$ \$40,000	63	2 (3.2%)	61 (96.8%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	133	7 (5.3%)	126 (94.7%)		1.69
$>$ \$100,000	143	5 (3.5%)	138 (96.5%)		1.11
<i>Anxiety</i>	464			.00	
Low problem	444	15 (3.4%)	429 (96.6%)		Ref
High problem	20	5 (25.0%)	15 (75.0%)		9.53***
<i>Depression</i>	302			.00	
Low problem	295	10 (3.4%)	285 (96.6%)		Ref
High problem	7	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)		21.38***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

life [62], possibly because this period of life is one in which many adults have the heaviest employment workload coupled with their lowest levels of job satisfaction [63, 64]. In the present study, these issues are compounded by the disruption that cancer is likely to create, further increasing the likelihood of sleep problems. Moreover, it is possible that while older individuals may experience more sleep disorders, they may simply be less bothered by these issues. Second, prior work examining the relationship between marital status with sleep has been inconsistent, with evidence that being single [64] or being married [40] can be associated with better sleep. In our patients, being married/having a life partner was a potential protective factor against

sleep problems. As noted before, the presence of someone to share in responsibilities may help to reduce overall stress; stress is directly associated with an increased probability of experiencing sleep problems [65], and individuals who have shared daytime obligations may consequently have increased opportunity to catch up on their sleep and experience less subjective concern about their sleep. Finally, we have replicated work conducted in the general population which showed that individuals with a higher level of education or with higher incomes were less likely to experience insomnia or to report subjective impairment due to their insomnia [66–69], and this is the case even when controlling for other demographic and psychological variables. As

Table 8 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with gynecologic cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 645$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	645			.46	
18–39	69	7 (10.1%)	62 (89.9%)		Ref
40–64	381	53 (13.9%)	328 (86.1%)		1.43
≥ 65	195	21 (10.8%)	174 (89.2%)		1.07
<i>Gender</i>	N/A				
Male					
Female					
<i>Race</i>	545			.21	
White	439	47 (10.7%)	392 (89.3%)		Ref
Black	28	6 (21.4%)	22 (78.6%)		2.28*
Asian	78	10 (12.8%)	68 (87.2%)		1.23
<i>Ethnicity</i>	572			.01	
Non-Hispanic	429	43 (10.0%)	386 (90.0%)		Ref
Hispanic	142	29 (20.3%)	114 (79.7%)		2.28**
<i>Marital status</i>	585			.73	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	242	28 (11.6%)	214 (88.4%)		Ref
Married/life partner	343	43 (12.5%)	300 (87.5%)		1.10
<i>Education</i>	635			.52	
\leq High school diploma	183	27 (14.8%)	156 (85.2%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	327	41 (12.5%)	286 (87.5%)		0.83
$>$ 4- year degree	125	13 (10.4%)	112 (89.6%)		0.67
<i>Annual household income</i>	485			.11	
$<$ \$40,000	222	37 (16.7%)	185 (83.3%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	171	16 (9.4%)	155 (90.6%)		0.52*
$>$ \$100,000	92	13 (14.1%)	79 (85.9%)		0.82
<i>Anxiety</i>	632			.00	
Low problem	564	52 (9.2%)	512 (90.8%)		Ref
High problem	68	26 (38.2%)	42 (61.8%)		6.10***
<i>Depression</i>	143			.00	
Low problem	128	11 (8.6%)	117 (91.4%)		Ref
High problem	15	7 (46.7%)	8 (53.3%)		9.31***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

external intervention for these socioeconomic factors are challenging, it will be important to ensure that patients from a lower socioeconomic background are consistently screened for potential sleep problems.

Rates of sleep problems were fairly comparable across cancer diagnoses, with the exception of those with prostate cancer (Tables 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). Older age and male gender in our sample were associated with a reduced likelihood of sleep problems. Moreover, the prostate cancer patients in our sample were more likely to be married, educated, and have a higher income, all factors that were associated with less sleep problems. Despite the lower prevalence of sleep problems among prostate cancer patients, it is important for clinicians to remember that simply because the patient does

not report a sleep problem does not mean that the symptom will not have detrimental health consequences. Further, we note that some of the statistically significant correlates of sleep problems were unique across individual cancer diagnoses. Therefore, providers should consider the disease group they treat to determine what correlates may be relevant for them to consider during clinical care.

We recognize that the results of our study are limited by several factors. First, our sample is from a single center and the screening measure used for this study was designed to be a practical tool to be used as part of routine clinical care. Therefore, our findings may not be generalizable to all cancer patients. Also, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes causal conclusions from being made

Table 9 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with lung cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 520$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	520			.42	
18–39	9	0 (0.0%)	9 (100.0%)		N/A
40–64	226	32 (14.2%)	194 (85.8%)		
≥ 65	285	35 (12.3%)	250 (87.7%)		
<i>Gender</i>	514			.10	
Male	236	37 (15.7%)	199 (84.3%)		Ref
Female	278	30 (10.8%)	248 (89.2%)		0.65
<i>Race</i>	464			.60	
White	335	41 (12.2%)	294 (87.8%)		Ref
Black	22	4 (18.2%)	18 (81.8%)		1.59
Asian	107	16 (15.0%)	91 (85.0%)		1.26
<i>Ethnicity</i>	469			.37	
Non-Hispanic	405	53 (13.1%)	352 (86.9%)		Ref
Hispanic	64	11 (17.2%)	53 (82.8%)		1.38
<i>Marital status</i>	491			.50	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	164	19 (11.6%)	145 (88.4%)		Ref
Married/ life partner	327	45 (13.8%)	282 (86.2%)		1.22
<i>Education</i>	504			.01	
\leq High school diploma	162	27 (16.7%)	135 (83.3%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	264	35 (13.3%)	229 (86.7%)		0.76
$>$ 4-year degree	78	2 (2.6%)	76 (97.4%)		0.13**
<i>Annual household income</i>	385			.23	
$<$ \$40,000	178	22 (12.4%)	156 (87.6%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	131	19 (14.5%)	112 (85.5%)		1.20
$>$ \$100,000	76	5 (6.6%)	71 (93.4%)		0.50
<i>Anxiety</i>	509			.00	
Low problem	472	51 (10.8%)	421 (89.2%)		Ref
High problem	37	14 (37.8%)	23 (62.2%)		5.03***
<i>Depression</i>	170			.00	
Low problem	157	15 (9.6%)	142 (90.4%)		Ref
High problem	13	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)		5.92**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

and does not capture the fluctuating nature of sleep over time. In future research, it will be valuable to explore the directionality of the relationships between sleep problems with anxiety and depression. Next, our work asked a unique, single, subjective item to describe sleep-related problems that has not been used in a prior research study. A more comprehensive evaluation of sleep, including an understanding of whether participants were endorsing clinical disorder or simply a subjective concern about their sleep, will be important as this would allow for a richer understanding of the sleep problems and also potentially allow for statistical comparisons with other chronic illness populations and the general population. However, we note that a single

question about a cancer patient's subjective sleep experience can be an important predictor of outcomes as it has been associated with their overall survival [70]. Further, it is acknowledged that different analytic approaches to categorizing sleep problems in our sample could have been taken (e.g., comparing those who reported not a problem/mild problem vs. moderate problem/severe problem/very severe problem or comparing those reporting not a problem/mild problem vs. moderate problem vs. severe problem/very severe problem). We believe that our dichotomization approach provides valuable information about the extent of truly significant sleep problems in cancer patients, underscoring the importance of sleep assessment and treatment during clinical care.

Table 10 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with urinary cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 329$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	329			.05	
18–39	6	0 (0.0%)	6 (100.0%)		N/A
40–64	145	27 (18.6%)	118 (81.4%)		
≥ 65	178	18 (10.1%)	160 (89.9%)		
<i>Gender</i>	326			.14	
Male	246	30 (12.2%)	216 (87.8%)		Ref
Female	80	15 (18.8%)	65 (81.2%)		1.66
<i>Race</i>	301			.12	
White	256	36 (14.1%)	220 (85.9%)		Ref
Black	12	4 (33.3%)	8 (66.7%)		3.06*
Asian	33	3 (9.1%)	30 (90.9%)		0.61
<i>Ethnicity</i>	301			.41	
Non-Hispanic	251	34 (13.5%)	217 (86.5%)		Ref
Hispanic	50	9 (18.0%)	41 (82.0%)		1.40
<i>Marital status</i>	318			.23	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	82	14 (17.1%)	68 (82.9%)		Ref
Married/life partner	236	28 (11.9%)	208 (88.1%)		0.65
<i>Education</i>	319			.06	
\leq High school diploma	87	17 (19.5%)	70 (80.5%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	177	23 (13.0%)	154 (87.0%)		0.62
$>$ 4-year degree	55	3 (5.5%)	52 (94.5%)		0.24*
<i>Annual household income</i>	241			.14	
$<$ \$40,000	77	15 (19.5%)	62 (80.5%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	98	11 (11.2%)	87 (88.8%)		0.52
$>$ \$100,000	66	6 (9.1%)	60 (90.9%)		0.41*
<i>Anxiety</i>	328			.00	
Low problem	302	30 (9.9%)	272 (90.1%)		Ref
High problem	26	14 (53.8%)	12 (46.2%)		10.58***
<i>Depression</i>	168			.00	
Low problem	154	15 (9.7%)	139 (90.3%)		Ref
High problem	14	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)		16.68***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Additionally, as multiple statistical tests were performed during our analyses, we recognize the increased probability of committing a type I error. Finally, we did not have the capability of collecting data on cancer-specific variables such as stage of disease or co-morbid health conditions and these may have impacted the patients' sleep.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our work adds value to our understanding of sleep in cancer patients. Our findings clearly demonstrate that a considerable proportion of patients are already experiencing sleep problems before any cancer therapy has been initiated. Active cancer treatment and its associated side effects (e.g., pain, fatigue etc.) can worsen their sleep,

making it critical to recognize sleep problems as early as possible. We have identified a number of key variables that clinicians should consider when meeting with their patients. Not screening for sleep problems during routine oncology appointments is a missed opportunity to help patients with issues that are infrequently discussed in medical settings [14, 19, 71–73]. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network has published guidelines for the care of cancer survivors that outlines an effective screening and referral process for providers [74], and these findings serve as a strong reminder that sleep function should be evaluated at every oncology visit.

Table 11 Demographic and psychological characteristics for patients with breast cancer by high/non-high sleep problem ($n = 2157$)

	No.	n high sleep problem (%)	n non-high sleep problem (%)	Statistical significance	Odds ratio
<i>Age</i>	2157			.01	
18–39	165	14 (8.5%)	151 (91.5%)		Ref
40–64	1489	223 (15.0%)	1266 (85.0%)		1.90*
≥ 65	503	54 (10.7%)	449 (89.3%)		1.30
<i>Gender</i>	N/A				
Male					
Female					
<i>Race</i>	1837			.00	
White	1380	190 (13.8%)	1190 (86.2%)		Ref
Black	132	27 (20.5%)	105 (79.5%)		1.61*
Asian	325	28 (11.4%)	297 (91.4%)		0.59*
<i>Ethnicity</i>	1959			.03	
Non-Hispanic	1406	174 (12.4%)	1232 (87.6%)		Ref
Hispanic	553	89 (16.1%)	464 (83.9%)		1.36*
<i>Marital status</i>	2003			.17	
Not married (single/widowed/divorced)	865	131 (15.1%)	734 (84.9%)		Ref
Married/ life partner	1138	148 (13.0%)	990 (87.0%)		0.84
<i>Education</i>	2042			.00	
\leq High school diploma	601	106 (17.6%)	495 (82.4%)		Ref
Some college or 4-year degree	1120	137 (12.2%)	983 (87.8%)		0.65**
$>$ 4-year degree	321	26 (8.1%)	295 (91.9%)		0.41***
<i>Annual household income</i>	1545			.00	
$<$ \$40,000	762	120 (15.7%)	642 (84.3%)		Ref
\$40,000–\$100,000	470	63 (13.4%)	407 (86.6%)		0.83
$>$ \$100,000	313	23 (7.3%)	290 (92.7%)		0.42***
<i>Anxiety</i>	2112			.00	
Low problem	1877	188 (10.0%)	1689 (90.0%)		Ref
High problem	235	98 (41.7%)	137 (58.3%)		6.43***
<i>Depression</i>	1021			.00	
Low problem	925	101 (10.9%)	824 (89.1%)		Ref
High problem	96	50 (52.1%)	46 (47.9%)		8.87***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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