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# Help Seeking for Cancer Symptoms: A Review of the Literature

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**A**lthough much progress has been made in reducing mortality rates and improving survival, cancer still accounts for more deaths than heart disease in people younger than 85 years in the United States (Jemal et al., 2008). At the Sixth International Cancer Conference held in Ireland in 2008, Scott Lipman, MD, reported that a great challenge of cancer research is to detect cancer at an early stage (Healy, 2008). Early detection can improve patient outcomes in terms of survival rates and more effective treatments (American Cancer Society, 2000; Campo, Comber, & Gavin, 2004). For self-discovered cancer symptoms, early detection depends on patients promptly seeking help from a healthcare professional. However, evidence shows that many people delay help seeking for self-discovered cancer symptoms (Bish, Ramirez, Burgess, & Hunter, 2005; Cockburn, Paul, Tzelepis, McElduff, & Byles, 2003; Corner, Hopkinson, & Roffe, 2006; Facione & Giancarlo, 1998; Howell, Smith, & Roman, 2008; Mason & Strauss, 2004a; Meechan, Collins, & Petrie, 2002; Ristvedt & Trinkhaus, 2005; Scott, Grunfeld, Main, & McGurk, 2006). Help seeking is a ubiquitous term used in many different contexts. *Helpseeking*, *help-seeking*, and *seeking help* are used interchangeably throughout the literature and often are discussed in the context of health-seeking behavior. This article aims to delineate how help seeking and related concepts are used in the literature and define help seeking in the context of cancer symptom discovery. In addition, theoretical literature that assists in understanding the concept of help seeking will be explored.

## Literature Search

A literature search was conducted with CINAHL®, EBSCO, and PubMed databases. The search was limited to articles published in English from 1998–2008 to focus the review and retrieve the most current literature (apart from seminal work by Facione, 1993; Facione & Dodd,

**Purpose/Objectives:** To define help seeking and identify a theoretical framework to explain the help-seeking process of patients with self-discovered cancer symptoms.

**Data Sources:** Literature published in English from 1998–2008.

**Data Synthesis:** Findings highlighted gender's role in help-seeking behavior. Delayed help seeking for cancer symptoms was common, with many associated influencing factors. To date, research on intentions to seek help has facilitated the development of health-promotion programs that target those who are likely to delay.

**Conclusions:** Help seeking was defined as a response to health changes as well as a part of the broader process of health-seeking behavior. Reviewed frameworks and models provided knowledge and understanding about help-seeking behavior in various contexts. However, an all-encompassing framework explaining the entire process was not identified.

**Implications for Nursing:** Nurses are in a unique position to promote prompt help seeking for patients with self-discovered cancer symptoms. Gaining clarity on the concept and identifying a theoretical framework may help nurses understand the complex nature of help seeking in patients with self-discovered cancer symptoms.

1995; Facione & Giancarlo, 1998; Facione, Giancarlo, & Chan, 2000; Facione, Miaskowski, Dodd, & Paul, 2002). Inclusion criteria were articles with *cancer* and at least one of the following key words in the titles or abstract: *help-seeking*, *help seeking*, *help-seeking*, and *help-seeking behavior*. When pertinent, articles on help seeking related to other diseases or conditions were reviewed to further clarify the term. In total, 50 relevant articles were retrieved from the databases; additional articles were located using the reference lists of the literature reviewed. The review sought to determine how authors conceptually, operationally, and theoretically defined help seeking and identify factors that influence the help-seeking behavior of patients with self-discovered cancer symptoms. Thematic analysis of the literature revealed two key themes: “help seeking