

Policy Brief: pan-Canadian Oncology Symptom Triage and Remote Support (COSTaRS) Practice Guides

This **Policy Brief** summarizes the systematic review used to update the pan-Canadian Oncology Symptom Triage and Remote Support (COSTaRS) practice guides. In a systematic review, the research team aimed to locate, quality appraise and synthesise all available evidence related to cancer symptoms. The team adopted rigorous methods to minimise bias for use in COSTaRS.

Intended audience: nurses and other health professionals supporting adults having cancer/cancer treatment-related symptoms.

Problem: adults with cancer undergoing treatment often experience symptoms that affect their quality of life and can progress to be life-threatening. Nurses can support them using evidence-informed clinical guidelines.

In this update, the COSTaRS Research Team answered:

What are the best practices (based on clinical practice guidelines and high-quality GRADE rated systematic reviews), for assessing, triaging, and managing cancer-related symptoms?

How do COSTaRS practice guides tackle the problem?

COSTaRS practice guides are designed to enhance the quality, safety, and consistency of cancer symptom management by nurses. Research studies showed that when nurses used COSTaRS, patients on cancer treatments had decreased symptom severity, improved quality of life, increased self-care management, fewer emergency department visits, and patients were satisfied.

Each 2-page practice guide, focused on one symptom, provides guidance for:

- assessing the severity of the symptom using symptom specific key criteria;
- triaging patients for symptom management based on the highest severity and using nursing judgement (mild with self-care, moderate with 24-hour follow-up, severe with immediate medical attention);
If not severe, proceed with...
- reviewing medications the patient is using for the specific symptom, including prescribed, over the counter, and herbal supplements;
- discussing self-care strategies to identify tactics the patient agrees to try;
- documenting the plan agreed upon with the patient.

What are the key findings?

Compared to the 2020 version of COSTaRS, the authors,

- Added evidence from 124 new or updated clinical practice guidelines and 51 systematic reviews
- Created 1 COSTaRS practice guide for **difficulty swallowing** (with author permission)
- Evidence from 54 sources were updated and removed evidence from 32 outdated sources (<2018)
- A caregiver partner on the research team, who had experience with nurses who used COSTaRS, reviewed all practice guides to ensure that the questions posed to patients and caregivers were written in plain language

What does this mean for healthcare?

Relevance of settings & populations	The results of this review are highly relevant to oncology programs in developed countries given that is where the clinical practice guidelines were published. The review evidence covers the 18 symptoms (e.g., Anxiety, Appetite Loss, Bleeding, Breathlessness, Constipation, Depression, Diarrhea, Difficulty Swallowing, Fatigue, Fever with Neutropenia, ...)
Implications for nurses and decision-makers	To support use of the 18 updated COSTaRS practice guides, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COSTaRS practice guides and online training are available in English and French on the Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology and the COSTaRS websites. • There are various formats available: electronic PDF, booklet for printing, and track changes for updating when it is embedded in electronic health records.

Reference: Stacey D, Macartney G, Tarasuk J, Kuziemy C, Smith M, Carley M for the COSTaRS Research Group. Policy Brief: COSTaRS Practice Guides. <https://decisionaid.ohri.ca>