



Life After Breast Cancer Treatment

Once breast cancer treatment ends, you may face a new set of issues and concerns. Some people have late effects of treatment or issues related to sexuality, fertility or menopause. Others worry about family members getting breast cancer and also worry that their own cancer will come back. It may help to know what to expect after treatment ends.



Emotional effects of treatment

The last day of treatment

It is normal to have many different feelings, emotions and fears after treatment ends. Not everyone feels the same. You may feel relieved and joyful and want to celebrate with friends and family. Or, you may feel let down, sad, tired and anxious. Having a quiet dinner, a special outing or a big celebration with friends and family may be ways to mark this day.

Will I ever feel normal again?

You may wonder when you will feel like your old self again. Friends and family often think you are fully recovered when your treatment ends. But, it may take time to recover physically and emotionally. Take the time you need before doing too much. If you have trouble saying “no,” practice saying, “No thanks, I’d rather not take on anything extra right now.” Take it slow and ease back into your activities.

Feeling anxious?

One reason you might be anxious is because you are now aware of every ache and pain in your body. Each pain brings with it the fear of the cancer’s return. This is normal. It will ease with time. If you are concerned about any symptoms, call your doctor.

Getting support from co-survivors (family and friends) can also help ease your fear. If fear starts to disrupt your daily life, talk to a doctor. Getting the support and treatment you need is important for your health and quality of life.

The anxiety of medical tests

Follow-up tests can be scary. It may help to plan these tests so you can have the results that same day or the next. Some people like to schedule time with their doctor to go over the results (either in person or over the phone). Then they do not have to wait for the office to call them. Take a family member or friend with you to the appointment for support.

Physical effects of treatment

Surgery

After breast surgery there will be scars, changes in the shape and feel of the breast or an absence of breast tissue. If you had a mastectomy, you may have some numbness across your chest. You may also have had (or are going to have) breast reconstruction.

It may take a while to get used to the new look of your breasts.

If you had lymph nodes in the underarm area removed (or treated with radiation therapy), you may be at risk of lymphedema [lim-fa-DEE-ma]. With lymphedema, lymphatic fluid collects in the arm (or other area such as the hand, fingers, chest or back) causing swelling. It can occur shortly after surgery or years after treatment. Ask a surgeon about symptoms and how to reduce your risk.

Chemotherapy

One to two months after chemotherapy ends, your hair will begin to grow back. It often comes in curlier. Hair texture will return to normal over many months. You may dye, color or treat your hair whenever you like.

Regular menstrual periods usually stop during chemotherapy. In women under 40, this may be temporary and periods will start again. In women over 40, it is more often permanent. This means menopause begins earlier than expected. Early menopause ends a woman's chance for a natural pregnancy. A woman who is concerned about the effects of chemotherapy on fertility should ask her doctor about options before she starts treatment.

Early menopause may also bring on symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Menopausal hormones are not an option for managing these symptoms. These hormones increase the risk of breast cancer. Your doctor can help you find other ways to manage these symptoms.

Chemotherapy may also lead to mental "fuzziness." This is sometimes called "chemo-brain" or "cancer-brain" (since it can also occur in women who have been treated for cancer, but did not get chemotherapy). Symptoms may include trouble with concentration, memory and multi-tasking. Most women say these symptoms improve with time. Talk to your doctor to rule out side effects from medicines or depression.

Weight gain is also a common side effect of chemotherapy. Exercise can help with weight loss and can also help relieve stress. It is also important to eat a healthy diet.

Radiation therapy

After radiation therapy ends, you may notice firmness or shrinkage of the breast over time. You may also have mild tanning of the skin in the treated area or red discoloration, especially around the surgical scar(s). These changes may be permanent. If the lymph nodes in the underarm area are treated with radiation therapy, you may be at risk of lymphedema.

Hormone therapy

Hormone therapy (tamoxifen and/or an aromatase inhibitor) is prescribed for up to 10 years. Menopausal symptoms (such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness) are common side effects.

Aromatase inhibitors may also cause joint pain, muscle pain and a loss of bone mineral density (which may lead to osteoporosis). Your doctor may prescribe another medication along with an aromatase inhibitor to prevent osteoporosis.

In rare cases, tamoxifen can cause uterine cancer and blood clots.