After Anal Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

For many people, cancer treatment often raises questions about next steps as a survivor.

- Living as an Anal Cancer Survivor

Cancer Concerns After Treatment

Treatment may remove or destroy the cancer, but it is very common to have questions about cancer coming back or treatment no longer working.

- Second Cancers After Anal Cancer

Living as an Anal Cancer Survivor

For many people with anal cancer, treatment can remove or destroy the cancer. The end of treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You may be relieved to finish treatment, but it’s hard not to worry about cancer coming back. This is very common if you’ve had cancer.

For other people, the cancer might never go away completely. Some people may need to get treatments to try and help keep the cancer in check. Learning to live with cancer that doesn’t go away can be difficult and very stressful.

Life after cancer means returning to some familiar things and also making some new choices.

Follow-up care
When treatment ends, your doctors will still want to watch you closely. It’s very important to go to all of your follow-up appointments. During these visits, your doctors will ask questions about any problems you may have and will do a physical exam, which will include a rectal exam, an exam of the anus, and an exam to see if any nearby lymph nodes are enlarged. Blood tests and imaging tests such as CT scans may also be ordered.

Almost any cancer treatment can have side effects. Some may last for a few weeks to months, but others can last the rest of your life. This is the time for you to talk to your cancer care team about any changes or problems you notice and any questions or concerns you have.

Follow-up doctor visits after treatment may be as often as every 3 months for at least 2 years, and then maybe less often as time goes on.

Close follow-up is very important in the first several months after treatment with chemoradiation, especially if not all of the cancer is gone. Some tumors continue to shrink after treatment, so the doctor will want to watch the cancer closely during this time to see if more treatment might still be needed.

For patients with colostomies

Most people treated for anal cancer don’t need extensive surgery (known as an abdominoperineal resection, or APR). But if you do have an APR, you will need to have a permanent colostomy.

If you have a colostomy, follow-up is important. You might feel worried or isolated from normal activities. A wound, ostomy, continence nurse (WOCN) or enterostomal therapist (a health care professional trained to help people with their colostomies) can teach you how to care for your colostomy. You can also ask the American Cancer Society about programs offering information and support in your area. See our colostomy information to learn more.

Ask your doctor for a survivorship care plan

Talk with your doctor about developing a survivorship care plan for you. This plan might include:

- A suggested schedule for follow-up exams and tests
- A schedule for other tests you might need in the future, such as early detection (screening) tests for other types of cancer, or tests to look for long-term health
effects from your cancer or its treatment

- A list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your doctor
- Diet and physical activity suggestions
- Reminders to keep your appointments with your primary care provider (PCP), who will monitor your general health care

Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records

Even after treatment, it’s very important to keep health insurance. Tests and doctor visits cost a lot, and even though no one wants to think of their cancer coming back, this could happen.

At some point after your cancer treatment, you might find yourself seeing a new doctor who doesn’t know about your medical history. It’s important to keep copies of your medical records to give your new doctor the details of your diagnosis and treatment. Learn more in Keeping Copies of Important Medical Records.

Can I lower my risk of the anal cancer progressing or coming back?

If you have (or have had) anal cancer, you probably want to know if there are things you can do that might lower your risk of the cancer growing or coming back, such as exercising, eating a certain type of diet, or taking nutritional supplements. Unfortunately, it’s not yet clear if there are things you can do that will help.

Adopting healthy behaviors such as not smoking, eating well, getting regular physical activity, and staying at a healthy weight might help, but no one knows for sure. However, we do know that these types of changes can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of anal cancer or other cancers.

About dietary supplements

So far, no dietary supplements (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of anal cancer progressing or coming back. This doesn’t mean that no supplements will help, but it’s important to know that none have been proven to do so.

Dietary supplements are not regulated like medicines in the United States – they do not
have to be proven effective (or even safe) before being sold, although there are limits on what they're allowed to claim they can do. If you’re thinking about taking any type of nutritional supplement, talk to your health care team. They can help you decide which ones you can use safely while avoiding those that might be harmful.

If the cancer comes back

If the cancer does recur at some point, your treatment options will depend on where the cancer is located, what treatments you’ve had before, and your health. For more information on how recurrent cancer is treated, see Treatment of Anal Cancer, by Stage.

For more general information on recurrence, you may also want to see Understanding Recurrence.

Could I get a second cancer after treatment?

People who’ve had anal cancer can still get other cancers. In fact, anal cancer survivors are at higher risk for getting some other types of cancer. Learn more in Second Cancers After Anal Cancer.

Getting emotional support

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when cancer is a part of your life. Some people are affected more than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support from other people, whether friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others. Learn more in Life After Cancer.

- References

See all references for Anal Cancer

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Lifestyle Changes After Treatment for Anal Cancer

You can’t change the fact that you’ve had cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making choices to help you stay healthy and feel as well as you can. This can be a time to look at your life in new ways. Maybe you’re thinking about how to improve your health over the long term. Some people even start during cancer treatment.

Making healthier choices

For many people, a diagnosis of cancer helps them focus on their health in ways they may not have thought much about in the past. Are there things you could do that might make you healthier? Maybe you could try to eat better or get more exercise. Maybe you could cut down on alcohol, or give up tobacco. Even things like keeping your stress level under control may help. Now is a good time to think about making changes that can have positive effects for the rest of your life. You will feel better and you will also be healthier.

You can start by working on those things that worry you most. Get help with those that are harder for you. For instance, if you are thinking about quitting smoking and need help, call the American Cancer Society for information and support at 1-800-227-2345.

Eating better

Eating right can be hard for anyone, but it can get even tougher during and after cancer treatment. Treatment may change your sense of taste. Nausea can be a problem. You may not feel like eating and lose weight when you don’t want to. Or you may have gained weight that you can’t seem to lose. All of these things can be very frustrating.

If treatment causes weight changes or eating problems, do the best you can and keep in mind that these problems usually get better over time. You may find it helps to eat small portions every 2 to 3 hours until you feel better. You may also want to ask your cancer team about seeing a diettian, an expert in nutrition who can give you ideas on how to deal with these treatment side effects.

One of the best things you can do after cancer treatment is put healthy eating habits into place. You may be surprised at the long-term benefits of some simple changes, like increasing the variety of healthy foods you eat. Getting to and staying at a healthy
weight, eating a healthy diet, and limiting your alcohol intake may lower your risk for a number of types of cancer, as well as having many other health benefits.

For more information, see our document *Nutrition and Physical Activity During and After Cancer Treatment: Answers to Common Questions*.

**Rest, fatigue, and exercise**

Extreme tiredness, called *fatigue*, is very common in people treated for cancer. This is not a normal tiredness, but a bone-weary exhaustion that often doesn’t get better with rest. For some people, fatigue lasts a long time after treatment, and can make it hard for them to be active and do the things they want to do. But exercise can help reduce fatigue. Studies have shown that patients who follow an exercise program tailored to their personal needs feel better physically and emotionally and can cope better, too.

If you were sick and not very active during treatment, it’s normal for your fitness, endurance, and muscle strength to decline. Any plan for physical activity should fit your own situation. A person who has never exercised will not be able to take on the same amount of exercise as someone who plays tennis twice a week. If you haven’t been active in a few years, you will have to start slowly – maybe just by taking short walks.

Talk with your health care team before starting anything. Get their opinion about your exercise plans. Then, try to find an exercise buddy so you’re not doing it alone. Having family or friends involved when starting a new activity program can give you that extra boost of support to keep you going when the push just isn’t there.

If you are very tired, you will need to learn to balance activity with rest. It’s OK to rest when you need to. Sometimes it’s really hard for people to allow themselves to rest when they are used to working all day or taking care of a household, but this is not the time to push yourself too hard. Listen to your body and rest when you need to. (For more information on dealing with fatigue, please see *Fatigue in People With Cancer* and *Anemia in People With Cancer*.)

Keep in mind exercise can improve your physical and emotional health.

- It improves your cardiovascular (heart and circulation) fitness.
- Along with a good diet, it will help you get to and stay at a healthy weight.
- It makes your muscles stronger.
- It reduces fatigue and helps you have more energy.
- It can help lower anxiety and depression.
- It can make you feel happier.
• It helps you feel better about yourself.
And long term, we know that getting regular physical activity plays a role in helping to lower the risk of some cancers, as well as having other health benefits.

• References
See all references for Anal Cancer

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Second Cancers After Anal Cancer

Cancer survivors can be affected by a number of health problems, but often their greatest concern is facing cancer again. If a cancer comes back after treatment it is called a “recurrence.” But some cancer survivors may develop a new, unrelated cancer later. This is called a “second cancer.” No matter what type of cancer you have had, it is still possible to get another (new) cancer, even after surviving the first.

Unfortunately, being treated for cancer doesn’t mean you can’t get another cancer. People who have had cancer can still get the same types of cancers that other people get. In fact, certain types of cancer and cancer treatments can be linked to a higher risk of certain second cancers.

Survivors of anal cancer can still get any type of second cancer, but they have an increased risk of

• Cancer of the tongue
• Cancer of the tonsil
• Vaginal cancer
• Vulvar cancer
• Lung cancer
• Kaposi sarcoma

Patients diagnosed with anal cancer before age 50 also have an increased risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma.
Anal cancer is linked to infection with human papilloma virus (HPV), and many of these cancers (cancers of the tongue, tonsil, vulva, and vagina) are also linked to HPV infection.

Follow-up after treatment

After completing treatment for anal cancer, you should see your doctor regularly to look for signs that the cancer has come back or spread. Experts do not recommend any additional testing to look for second cancers in patients without symptoms. Let your doctor know about any new symptoms or problems, because they could be caused by the cancer coming back or by a new disease or second cancer.

Survivors of anal cancer should follow the American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of cancer and stay away from tobacco products. Smoking increases the risk of many cancers and might further increase the risk of many of the second cancers seen after anal cancer.

To help maintain good health, survivors should also:

- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight
- Adopt a physically active lifestyle
- Consume a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant foods
- Limit consumption of alcohol to no more than 1 drink per day for women or 2 per day for men

These steps may also lower the risk of some cancers.

See Second Cancers in Adults for more information about causes of second cancers.

References

Can I Lower the Risk of My Anal Cancer
Progressing or Coming Back?

Most people want to know if there are specific lifestyle changes they can make to reduce their risk of the cancer progressing or coming back. Unfortunately, for most cancers there isn’t much solid evidence to guide people. This doesn’t mean that nothing will help – it’s just that for the most part this is an area that hasn’t been well studied. Most studies have looked at lifestyle changes as ways of preventing cancer in the first place, not slowing it down or preventing it from coming back.

At this time, not enough is known about anal cancer to say for sure if there are things you can do that will help. Tobacco use has clearly been linked to anal cancer, so not smoking may help reduce your risk. We don’t know for sure if this will help, but we do know that it can help improve your appetite and overall health. It can also reduce the chance of developing other types of cancer. If you want to quit smoking and need help, call your American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345, or read our Guide to Quitting Smoking.

For people infected with HIV, it’s very important to do what you can to keep your immune system healthy and to limit your risk of infections. This includes being sure to take your antiviral medicines regularly. Talk with your doctor about getting vaccines and other steps you can take to help prevent infections.

Adopting other healthy behaviors such as eating well, getting regular physical activity, and staying at a healthy weight might help as well, but no one knows for sure. However, we do know that these types of changes can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of cancer.

So far, no dietary supplements of any kind have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of anal cancer progressing or coming back. Again, this doesn’t necessarily mean that none will help, but it’s important to understand that none have been proven to do so.

- References

See all references for Anal Cancer

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How Might Having Anal Cancer Affect Your Emotional Health?

During and after treatment, you may find yourself overcome with many different emotions. This happens to a lot of people.

You may find yourself thinking about death and dying. Or maybe you’re more aware of the effect the cancer has on your family, friends, and career. You may take a new look at your relationships with those around you. Unexpected issues may also cause concern. For instance, you might be stressed by financial concerns resulting from your treatment. You might also see your health care team less often and have more time on your hands. These changes can make some people anxious.

Almost everyone who has been through cancer can benefit from getting some type of support. You need people you can turn to for strength and comfort. Support can come in many forms: family, friends, cancer support groups, church or spiritual groups, online support communities, or one-on-one counselors. What’s best for you depends on your situation and personality. Some people feel safe in peer-support groups or education groups. Others would rather talk in an informal setting, such as church. Others may feel more at ease talking one-on-one with a trusted friend or counselor. Whatever your source of strength or comfort, make sure you have a place to go with your concerns.

The cancer journey can feel very lonely. It’s not necessary or good for you to try to deal with everything on your own. And your friends and family may feel shut out if you do not include them. Let them in, and let in anyone else who you feel may help. If you aren’t sure who can help, call your American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 and we can put you in touch with a group or resource that may work for you.

- References
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If Treatment for Anal Cancer Stops Working

If cancer keeps growing or comes back after one kind of treatment, it’s possible that another treatment plan might still cure the cancer, or at least keep it under control enough to help you live longer and feel better. Clinical trials also might offer chances to try newer treatments that could be helpful. But when a person has tried many different treatments and the cancer has not gotten any better, even newer treatments might no longer be helpful. If this happens, it’s important to weigh the possible limited benefits of trying a new treatment against the possible downsides, including side effects. Everyone has their own way of looking at this.

This is likely to be the hardest part of your battle with cancer – when you have been through many treatments and nothing’s working anymore. Your doctor might offer you new options, but at some point you may need to consider that treatment is not likely to improve your health or change your outcome or survival.

If you want to continue to get treatment for as long as you can, you need to think about the odds of treatment having any benefit and how this compares to the possible risks and side effects. Your doctor can estimate how likely it is the cancer will respond to treatment you’re considering. For instance, the doctor may say that more treatment might have about a 1 in 100 chance of working. Some people are still tempted to try this. But it’s important to have realistic expectations if you do choose this plan.

Palliative care

No matter what you decide to do, it’s important to feel as good as you can. Make sure you are asking for and getting treatment for any symptoms you might have, such as nausea or pain. This type of treatment is called palliative care.

Palliative care helps relieve symptoms, but is not expected to cure the disease. It can be given along with cancer treatment, or can even be cancer treatment. The difference is its purpose – the main goal of palliative care is to improve the quality of your life, or help you feel as good as you can for as long as you can. Sometimes this means using drugs to help with symptoms like pain or nausea. Sometimes, though, the treatments used to control your symptoms are the same as those used to treat cancer. For instance, radiation might be used to help relieve pain caused by cancer that has spread to the bones. Or chemo might be used to help shrink a tumor and keep it from blocking the bowels. But this is not the same as treatment to try to cure the cancer.
Hospice care

At some point, you may benefit from hospice care. This is special care that treats the person rather than the disease; it focuses on quality rather than length of life. Most of the time, it’s given at home. Your cancer may be causing problems that need to be managed, and hospice focuses on your comfort. You should know that while getting hospice care often means the end of treatments such as chemo and radiation, it doesn’t mean you can’t have treatment for the problems caused by your cancer or other health conditions. In hospice the focus of your care is on living life as fully as possible and feeling as well as you can at this difficult time.

Staying hopeful is important, too. Your hope for a cure may not be as bright, but there’s still hope for good times with family and friends – times that are filled with happiness and meaning. Pausing at this time in your cancer treatment gives you a chance to refocus on the most important things in your life. Now is the time to do some things you’ve always wanted to do and to stop doing the things you no longer want to do. Though the cancer may be beyond your control, there are still choices you can make.

You can learn more about the changes that occur when treatment stops working, and about planning ahead for yourself and your family, in *Advance Directive* and *Nearing the End of Life*. You can read them online or call us at 1-800-227-2345 to have free copies mailed to you.

- References
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