After Male Breast Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

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

- What Happens After Treatment for Breast Cancer in Men?
- Lifestyle Changes for Men After Treatment of Breast Cancer
- How Does Having Breast Cancer Affect a Man's Emotional Health?

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.

- Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Male Breast Cancer?
- If Treatment for Breast Cancer in Men Stops Working

What Happens After Treatment for Breast Cancer in Men?

For many men with breast cancer, treatment may remove or destroy the cancer. Completing treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You may be relieved to finish treatment, but find it hard not to worry about cancer coming back. (When cancer comes back after treatment, it is called a recurrence.) This is a very common concern in people who have had cancer.

It may take a while before your fears lessen. But it may help to know that many cancer survivors have learned to live with this uncertainty and are leading full lives. See Understanding Recurrence for more about this.
For some people, cancer may never go away completely. These people may get regular
treatments with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or other therapies to try to help keep
the cancer in check. Learning to live with cancer that does not go away can be difficult
and very stressful. It has its own type of uncertainty. *Managing Cancer as a Chronic
Illness*, talks more about this.

**Follow-up care**

When treatment ends, your doctors will still want to watch you closely. It is 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 may do exams and lab tests
or x-rays and scans to look for signs of cancer or signs of treatment side effects. 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. Now 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.

At first, your follow-up appointments will probably be scheduled for every 3 to 6 months.
The longer you have been free of cancer, the less often the appointments are needed.
After 5 years, they are typically done about once a year.

If you had breast-conserving surgery, your doctor might recommend you have yearly
mammograms of the breast that had the cancer. Mammograms of the opposite breast
may also be done, however it isn't clear how helpful they are

If you are taking an aromatase inhibitor or a luteinizing hormone-releasing hormone
(LHRH) analog, you may be at increased risk for osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).
Your doctor may want to monitor your bone health and may consider testing your bone
density.

Other tests such as blood tumor marker studies, blood tests of liver function, bone
scans, and chest x-rays are not a standard part of follow-up. Getting these tests doesn't
help someone treated with breast cancer live longer. They will be done (as indicated) if
you have symptoms or physical exam findings that suggest that the cancer has
recurred. These and other tests may be done as part of evaluating new treatments by
clinical trials.

If symptoms, exams, or tests suggest cancer may have recurred, imaging tests such as
a chest x-ray, CT scan, PET scan, MRI scan, bone scan, and/or a biopsy may be done.
Your doctor may also measure levels of blood tumor markers such as CA15-3 or CA27-
29. The blood levels of these substances go up in some men if their cancer has spread
to their bones or other organs such as the liver. They are not elevated in everyone with recurrence, so they aren't always helpful. If they are elevated, they may help your doctor monitor the results of therapy.

If cancer does recur, treatment will depend on the location of the cancer and what treatments you've had before. It may include surgery, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, or some combination of these. For more information on how recurrent cancer is treated, see "Recurrent cancer" in the section "Treatment of breast cancer in men by stage." For more general information, you might also want to see the Understanding Recurrence section of our website.

It is also 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.

**Lymphedema**

Lymphedema, or swelling of the arm due to buildup of fluid, can happen any time after breast cancer treatment. Any treatment that removes axillary (underarm) lymph nodes or treats them with radiation carries the risk of lymphedema because normal drainage of lymph fluid from the arm is changed.

One of the first symptoms of lymphedema may be a feeling of tightness in the arm or hand on the same side that was treated for breast cancer. Any swelling, tightness, or injury to the arm or hand should be reported promptly to your doctor or nurse.

There is no good way to predict who will and will not develop lymphedema. It can occur right after surgery, or months, or even years later. The possibility of developing lymphedema remains throughout a man's lifetime.

With care, lymphedema can often be avoided or, if it develops, kept under control. Injury or infection of the affected arm or hand can contribute to the development of lymphedema or make existing lymphedema worse, so preventive measures should focus on protecting the arm and hand. Most doctors recommend avoiding having blood drawn from or blood pressure taken on the arm on the side of the lymph node surgery or radiation.

To learn more, see Lymphedema (the information also applies to men).

- References
  See all references for Breast Cancer in Men
Seeing a New Doctor After Treatment for Breast Cancer in Men

At some point after your cancer diagnosis and treatment, you may find yourself seeing a new doctor who does not know anything about your medical history. It is important that you be able to give your new doctor the exact details of your diagnosis and treatment. Gathering these details soon after treatment may be easier than trying to get them at some point in the future. Make sure you have this information handy:

- A copy of your pathology report(s) from any biopsies or surgeries
- If you had surgery, a copy of your operative report(s)
- If you were in the hospital, a copy of the discharge summary that doctors prepare when patients are sent home
- If you had radiation therapy, copy of the treatment summary
- If you had systemic therapy (hormone therapy, chemotherapy, or targeted therapies), a list of your drugs, drug doses, and when you took them
- Copies of your x-rays and other imaging studies (these can be put on a DVD)

The doctor might want copies of this information for his records, but always be sure to keep copies for yourself.

- References
See all references for Breast Cancer in Men
Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Male Breast 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.

Men who have had breast cancer can get any type of second cancer, but they have an increased risk of:

- A second breast cancer (this is different than the first cancer coming back)
- Small intestine cancer
- Rectal cancer
- Pancreas cancer
- Prostate cancer
- Basal and squamous cell skin cancer
- Myeloid leukemia

For some second cancers, shared genetic risk factors may play a role. For example, men with mutations in the BRCA2 gene have an increased risk of prostate and pancreas cancer as well as breast cancer.

Follow-up care

After completing treatment for breast cancer, you should still see your doctor regularly to look for signs the cancer has come back or spread. Experts do not recommend any specific tests 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 breast 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.

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 2 drinks per day

These steps may also lower the risk of some cancers.

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

- References
  See all references for Breast Cancer in Men

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**Lifestyle Changes for Men After Treatment of Breast Cancer**

You can't change the fact that you have 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 are 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 the 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. This tobacco cessation and coaching service can help increase your chances of quitting for good.

**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 caused weight changes or eating or taste 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 dietitian, an expert in nutrition who can give you ideas on how to deal with these treatment side effects. You can read more in *Nutrition for the Person With Cancer During Treatment*.

One of the best things you can do after cancer treatment is to start healthy eating habits. 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.

**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 doesn't get better with rest. For some people, fatigue lasts a long time after treatment, and can make it hard for them to exercise and do other 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 is 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 exercised
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. Involving family or friends when starting a new exercise 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 balance activity with rest. It is 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, see Cancer-related Fatigue and Anemia in People With Cancer.

Keep in mind regular physical activity 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 Breast Cancer in Men

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How Does Having Breast Cancer Affect a Man’s Emotional Health?
Once your treatment ends, you may find yourself overcome with many different emotions. This happens to a lot of people. You may have been going through so much during treatment that you could only focus on getting through each day. Now it may feel like a lot of other issues are catching up with you.

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 relationship with your spouse or partner. Unexpected issues may also cause concern. For instance, as you feel better and have fewer doctor visits, you will 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 is 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 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. You can also find out more in Changes in Mood or Thinking.

References

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If Treatment for Breast Cancer in Men
Stops Working

If cancer keeps growing or comes back after one kind of treatment, it is possible that another treatment plan might still cure the cancer, or at least shrink it enough to help you live longer and feel better. But when a person has tried many different treatments and has not gotten any better, the cancer tends to become resistant to all treatment. If this happens, it's important to weigh the possible limited benefits of a new treatment against the possible downsides. 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 every medical treatment the doctors offer you and nothing's working anymore. Your doctor may offer you new options, but at some point you 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 as long as you can, you still need to think about the odds of treatment having any benefit. In many cases, your doctor can estimate how likely it is the cancer will respond to treatment you are considering. For instance, the doctors may say that more chemo or radiation might have about a 1% chance of working. Some people are still tempted to try this. But it is important to think about and understand your reasons for choosing this plan.

No matter what you decide to do, you need 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 treatment.

Palliative treatment 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 purpose 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 bone 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. You can learn more about the physical and emotional changes, as well as plans and preparations for yourself and your family, in Nearing the End of Life.

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 is given at home. Your cancer may be causing problems that need to be managed, and hospice focuses on your comfort. You should know that getting hospice
care doesn't mean you can't have treatment for the problems caused by your cancer or other health conditions. It just means that the focus of your care is on living life as fully as possible and feeling as well as you can at this difficult time. You can learn more about hospice in Hospice Care.

Staying hopeful is important, too. Your hope for a cure may not be as bright, but there is still hope for good times — times filled with happiness and meaning — with family and friends. Pausing at this time in your cancer treatment gives you a chance to refocus on the most important things in your life. This 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.

- References

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