



# After Treatment

## Living as a Cancer Survivor

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

- [What Will Happen After Treatment for Ovarian Cancer?](#)
- [Lifestyle Changes After Having Ovarian Cancer](#)
- [How Does Having Ovarian Cancer Affect Your 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 Ovarian Cancer?](#)
- [If Ovarian Cancer Treatment Stops Working](#)

# What Will Happen After Treatment for Ovarian Cancer?

For some people with ovarian cancer, treatment may remove or destroy the cancer. Completing treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You will be relieved to finish treatment, yet it is hard not to worry about cancer coming back. (When cancer returns, it is called *recurrence*.) This is a very common concern for those 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. Our document [Living With Uncertainty: The Fear of Cancer Recurrence](#) gives more detailed information on this.

For other people, the cancer never goes away completely. These women may be treated with [chemotherapy](#) on and off for years. Learning to live with cancer that does not go away can be difficult and very stressful. It has its own type of uncertainty. Our document [Managing Cancer as a Chronic Illness](#) gives more information 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 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. 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 for ovarian cancer usually includes a careful general physical exam and blood tests for tumor markers that help recognize recurrence. For epithelial ovarian cancer, it is not clear if checking for CA-125 levels and treating you before you have symptoms will help you live longer. Treatment based only on CA-125 levels and not symptoms can increase side effects, so it is important to discuss the pros and cons of CA-125 monitoring and quality of life with your doctor.

The choice of which tumor marker blood tests to check depends on the type of cancer a woman has. CA-125 is the tumor marker used most often to follow-up women with epithelial ovarian cancers. Others, such as CA 19-9, CEA, and HE-4, are used most often in patients whose CA-125 levels never went up.

For women with germ cell tumors, blood is tested for alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) and/or human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG). Checking levels of hormones like estrogen, testosterone, and inhibin is sometimes helpful for women with stromal cancers.

After your cancer treatment is finished, you will probably need to still see your cancer doctor for many years. So, ask what kind of follow-up schedule you can expect.

It is 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.

Should your cancer come back, our document [Coping With Cancer Recurrence](#) can give you information on how to manage and cope with this phase of your treatment.

## Seeing a new doctor

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 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 biopsy or surgery
- If you had surgery, a copy of your operative report(s)
- If you were hospitalized, a copy of the discharge summary that every doctor must prepare when patients are sent home from the hospital
- If you had radiation therapy, a copy of the treatment summary
- If you had drug therapy (such as chemotherapy, hormone therapy, or targeted therapy), a list of your drugs, drug doses, and when you took them
- Copies of x-rays and imaging tests (these can be put on a DVD)

The doctor may want copies of this information for his records, but always keep copies for yourself.

- [References](#)

[See all references for Ovarian Cancer](#)

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## Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Ovarian 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 ovarian cancer can get any type of second cancer, but they have an increased risk of:

- [Colon cancer](#)
- [Rectal cancer](#)
- [Small intestine cancer](#)
- [Cancer of the renal pelvis](#) (part of the kidney)
- [Breast cancer](#)
- [Bladder cancer](#)
- [Bile duct cancer](#)
- [Melanoma of the eye](#)
- [Acute leukemia](#)

Women treated with radiation therapy also have an increased risk of [soft tissue cancer](#) and possibly [pancreas cancer](#).

The increased risk of leukemia is linked to treatment with chemotherapy. The main drugs linked with leukemia risk are platinum agents (like cisplatin and carboplatin). The risk increases as the total dose of these drugs increases, but the overall risk is still low.

Genetic factors that may have caused ovarian cancer in the first place may also add to the risk of breast and colorectal cancers. For example, women with mutations in the *BRCA* genes have a high risk of both ovarian and breast cancer, as well as some other cancers. Women with the inherited disorder called hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC, also called Lynch syndrome), have a high risk of colon, rectum, small intestine, and renal pelvis cancers, as well as ovarian and other cancers.

Other risk factors for ovarian and breast cancer that overlap may also help explain some of the increased risk of breast cancer in ovarian cancer survivors.

Studies have shown that the risk of developing solid tumors is higher during all follow-up periods after ovarian cancer.

### **Follow-up after treatment**

After completing treatment for ovarian cancer, you should still see your doctor regularly to watch for signs that the cancer has come back. Experts do not recommend any

special testing to look for second cancers in survivors of ovarian cancer 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.

These women should follow the [American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of cancer](#), such as those for breast and colorectal cancers.

All survivors of ovarian cancer should [avoid tobacco smoke](#), as 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 1 drink 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](#)

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## Lifestyle Changes After Having Ovarian 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 at 1-800-227-2345. The 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 might 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.

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 not been physically active 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 activity plans. Then, try to find a 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 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, please see [Cancer-related Fatigue](#) 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](#)

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# How Does Having Ovarian Cancer Affect Your Emotional Health?

When 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 those around you. 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 isn't 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 don't 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.

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# If Ovarian Cancer Treatment 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 the cancer 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 many medical treatments and nothing's working anymore. Your doctor may offer you new options, but at some point you may need to consider that treatment isn't 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. In many cases, your doctor can estimate how likely it is the cancer will respond to treatment you are considering. For instance, the doctor 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 care*.

[Palliative care](#) helps relieve symptoms, but isn't 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 isn't the same as treatment to try to cure the cancer.

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 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. You can learn more about hospice in our documents [Hospice Care](#) and [Nearing the End of Life](#).

Staying hopeful is important, too. Your hope for a cure may not be as bright, but there is 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.

- [References](#)

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