After Pancreatic Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

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

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For some people with pancreatic cancer, treatment can 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. This is very common if you’ve had cancer.

For most people with pancreatic exocrine cancer (and some people with pancreatic neuroendocrine tumors), the cancer might never go away completely, or it might come back in another part of the body. These people may get regular treatments with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or other therapies to help keep the cancer under control for as long as possible. Learning to live with cancer that does not go away can be difficult and very stressful.

Follow-up care

If you have completed treatment, 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 are having and may do exams and lab or imaging tests to look for signs of cancer or treatment side effects.

Some treatment side effects might last a long time or might not even show up until years after you have finished treatment. Your doctor visits are a good time to ask questions and talk about any changes or problems you notice or concerns you have.

**Doctor visits and tests**

Your schedule of doctor visits, exams, and tests will depend on the original extent of your cancer, how it was treated, and other factors. Tests might include blood tests for tumor markers (such as CA 19-9) or imaging tests (such as CT scans). Be sure to follow your doctor’s advice about follow-up tests.

**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 list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your doctor
- A schedule for other tests you might need, such as tests to look for long-term health effects from your cancer or its treatment
- Diet and physical activity suggestions

**Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records**

Even if you’ve finished 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.

**Help with nutrition and pain**
Pancreatic cancer often causes weight loss and weakness from poor nutrition. These symptoms might be caused by treatment or by the cancer itself. A team of doctors and nutritionists can work with you to provide nutritional supplements and information about your individual nutritional needs. This can help you keep up your weight and nutritional intake. Many patients need to take pancreatic enzymes in pill form to help digest food so that it can be absorbed. For serious nutrition problems, the doctor might need to put a feeding tube into the stomach to improve nutrition and energy levels. This is usually temporary. For more information and nutrition tips for during and after cancer treatment, see Nutrition for the Person With Cancer During Treatment.

There are many ways to control pain caused by pancreatic cancer. If you have pain, tell your cancer care team right away, so they can give you prompt and effective pain management. For more information, see the Cancer Pain section of our website.

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

If you have (or have had) pancreatic 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.

Tobacco use has clearly been linked to pancreas cancer, so not smoking may help reduce your risk. We don’t know for certain 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.

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.

**About dietary supplements**

So far, no dietary supplements (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of pancreatic 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 your cancer does come back at some point, your treatment options will depend on the where the cancer is, what treatments you’ve had before, and your current health and preferences. Treatment options might include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or some combination of these. For more on how recurrent cancer is treated, see *Treatment of Pancreatic Cancer, Based on Extent of the Cancer.*

For more general information on dealing with a recurrence, you might also want to see *Understanding Recurrence*.

**Getting emotional support**

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when pancreatic 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 *Coping With Cancer*.

**References**

See all references for Pancreatic Cancer

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