After Stomach Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

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

- What Happens After Treatment for Stomach Cancer?
- Lifestyle Changes After Stomach Cancer
- How Might Having Stomach 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 Stomach Cancer?
- If Treatment for Stomach Cancer Stops Working

What Happens After Treatment for Stomach Cancer?

For some people with stomach 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 returns, it is called recurrence.) This is a very common concern among 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. Understanding Recurrence gives more detailed information on this.
In other people, the 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

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

Most doctors recommend careful follow-up, with a physical exam and review of symptoms every 3 to 6 months for the first few years, then at least yearly after that. Lab tests might also be done. Scans are not usually needed at each visit, but should be done if there are any suspicious symptoms or physical findings.

If you have had surgery, your health care team may suggest that you meet with a nutritionist, who can help you adjust to changes in your eating habits.

People who have had surgery — especially if they had the upper part of their stomach removed (in either a subtotal or total gastrectomy) — will probably need to have their vitamin blood levels tested regularly and may need to get vitamin supplements, which may include B12 injections. (The pill form of vitamin B12 isn’t absorbed if the upper part of the stomach has been removed.)

It is important to keep your health insurance during this time. Tests and doctor visits can cost a lot, and even though no one wants to think of their cancer coming back, this could happen.

Should your cancer come back, 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 the following 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 stayed in the hospital, a copy of the discharge summary that doctors prepare when patients are sent home
- If you had radiation therapy, a copy of the treatment summary
- If you had chemotherapy or targeted therapies, a list of the drugs, drug doses, and when you took them
- Copies of your x-rays and imaging tests (these can often be placed on a DVD)

References

See all references for Stomach Cancer

Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Stomach 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 stomach cancer can get any type of second cancer. They do not get second cancers at an increased rate overall, but they do have an increased risk of cancers of the thyroid and small intestine.

**Follow-up after treatment**

After completing treatment for stomach cancer, you should still see your doctor regularly and may have tests to look for signs 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 stomach 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 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*

See all references for Stomach Cancer

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**Lifestyle Changes After Stomach 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 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.

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. This is especially true for cancers that affect the digestive tract, such as stomach cancer. The cancer or its treatment can affect how you eat and absorb nutrition. Nausea can be a problem from some treatments. You may lose your appetite for a while and lose weight when you don’t want to.

During treatment: If you are losing weight or have trouble eating during treatment, do the best you can. Eat what appeals to you. Eat what you can, when you can. You might find it helps to eat small portions every 2 to 3 hours until you feel better. Now is not the time to restrict your diet. Try to keep in mind that these problems usually improve over time. Your cancer team may refer you to a dietitian, an expert in nutrition who can give you ideas on how to fight some of the side effects of your treatment.

After treatment: If part or all of your stomach has been removed, you might need to eat smaller amounts of food more often. Your doctor or nutritionist may also recommend that you stay upright for some time after eating. Your health care team can help you adjust your diet if you are having problems eating.

Some patients have problems with nausea, diarrhea, sweating, and flushing after
eating. This is called dumping syndrome. When part or all of the stomach is removed, the food that is swallowed quickly passes into the intestine, leading to these symptoms after eating. These symptoms often get better over time.

Some people may need nutritional supplements to help make sure they get the nutrition they need. Some people may even need a feeding tube, usually called a jejunostomy tube (or J-tube), put into the small intestine. This is done through a small hole in the skin over the abdomen during a minor operation. A J-tube allows liquid nutrition to be put directly into the small intestine to help prevent weight loss and improve nutrition. Less often, the tube may be placed into the lower part of the stomach instead. This is known as a gastrostomy tube or G-tube.

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.

**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 situation. An older person who has never exercised will not be able to take on the same amount of exercise as a 20-year-old 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. Having family or friends involved 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, 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.

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

Most people want to know if there are specific lifestyle changes they can make to reduce their risk of their cancer progressing or coming back. Unfortunately, for most cancers there is little 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 stomach cancer to say for sure if there are things you can do that will be helpful.

Tobacco use has clearly been linked to stomach cancer, so not smoking might 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 the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345. You can also learn more in our Guide to Quitting Smoking.

Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and staying at a healthy weight are also linked with a lower risk of stomach cancer, but again we don’t know if these types of changes affect the risk of cancer progressing or coming back. However, we do know that they can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of cancer.
How Might Having Stomach 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 relationship with those around you. Unexpected issues may also cause concern. For instance, you might see your health care team less often after treatment and have more time on your hands. These changes can make some people anxious.

Almost everyone who is going through or 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 may also want to read our booklet Distress in People with Cancer.
If Treatment for Stomach Cancer 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 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. 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 treatment might have about a 1 in 100 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 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 medicines 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. 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 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 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 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

See all references for Stomach Cancer

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