After Thyroid Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

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

- Living as a Thyroid Cancer Survivor
- Getting Emotional Support

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 Lower the Risk of My Cancer Progressing or Coming Back?
- Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Thyroid Cancer?
- If Thyroid Cancer Treatments Are No Longer Working

Living as a Thyroid Cancer Survivor

For many people with thyroid 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 growing or coming back. (When cancer comes back after treatment, it is called recurrence.) This is a very common concern in people who have had cancer.
For some people, thyroid cancer may never go away completely. These people may get regular treatments with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or other therapies to help keep the cancer in check. Learning to live with cancer as a more of a chronic disease can be difficult and very stressful. It has its own type of uncertainty. Managing Cancer as a Chronic Illness covers 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 follow-up appointments. During these visits, your doctors will ask about symptoms, examine you, and might order blood tests or imaging tests such as radioiodine scans or ultrasounds. Follow-up is needed to check for cancer recurrence or spread, as well as possible side effects of certain treatments. This is the time for you to ask your health care team any questions you need answered and to discuss any concerns you might have.

Most people do very well after treatment, but follow-up care can continue for a lifetime. This is very important since most thyroid cancers grow slowly and can recur even 10 to 20 years after initial treatment. Your health care team will explain what tests you need and how often they should be done.

Doctor visits and tests

Papillary or follicular cancer: If you have had papillary or follicular cancer, and your thyroid gland has been completely removed or ablated, your doctors may consider at least one radioactive iodine scan after treatment, especially if you are at higher risk for recurrence. This is usually done about 6 to 12 months later. If the result is negative, you will generally not need further scans unless you have symptoms or other abnormal test results.

Your blood will also be tested for TSH and thyroglobulin levels. Thyroglobulin is made by thyroid tissue, so after total thyroid removal and ablation it should be at very low levels or not be found at all in your blood. If the thyroglobulin level begins to rise, it might be a sign the cancer is coming back, and further testing will be done. This usually includes a radioactive iodine scan, and may include PET scans and other imaging tests.

For those with a low-risk, small papillary cancer that was treated by removing only one lobe of the thyroid, a physical exam by your doctor, as well as a thyroid ultrasound and periodic chest x-ray is typical.

If the cancer does come back, treatment would be as described for recurrent cancer in
Treatment of Thyroid Cancer, by Type and Stage\textsuperscript{2}.

**Medullary thyroid cancer:** If you had medullary thyroid cancer (MTC), your doctors will check the levels of calcitonin and carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) in your blood. If these begin to rise, imaging tests such as an ultrasound of the neck or a CT or MRI scan will be done to look for any cancer coming back. If the tests show recurrent cancer, treatment is as described in Treatment of Thyroid Cancer, by Type and Stage\textsuperscript{3}.

Each type of treatment for thyroid cancer has side effects that may last for a few months. Some, like the need for thyroid hormone pills, may be lifelong. You may be able to speed your recovery by being aware of the side effects before you start treatment. You might be able to take steps to reduce them and shorten the length of time they last. Don’t hesitate to tell your cancer care team about any symptoms or side effects that bother you so they can help you manage them.

**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\textsuperscript{4}. 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\textsuperscript{5}.
Can I Lower the Risk of My Cancer Progressing or Coming Back?

If you have (or have had) thyroid 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.

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 might 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. A tobacco cessation and coaching service can help increase your chances of quitting for good.

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 and other treatment side effects, please see Managing Cancer-
related Side Effects\textsuperscript{5}.

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.

At this time, not enough is known about thyroid cancer to say for sure if there are things you can do that will be helpful. Adopting healthy behaviors such as not smoking, eating well, and maintaining a healthy weight may 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 cancer.

References

See all references for Thyroid Cancer

(https://www.cancer.org/content/cancer/en/cancer/thyroid-cancer/references.html)

Last Medical Review: March 31, 2016 Last Revised: April 15, 2016

Getting Emotional Support

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when thyroid cancer is 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
Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Thyroid 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 thyroid cancer can get any type of second cancer, but they have an increased risk of:

- **Breast cancer**¹ (in women)
- **Prostate cancer**²
- **Kidney cancer**³
- **Adrenal cancer**⁴

Adrenal cancer risk is especially high in people who had the medullary type of thyroid cancer.
Patients treated with radioactive iodine also have an increased risk of acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL)\(^5\), stomach cancer\(^6\), and salivary gland cancer\(^7\).

**After treatment**

After completing treatment for thyroid cancer, you should see your doctor regularly. You may also have tests 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.

Patients who have completed treatment should follow the American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of cancer\(^8\).

All patients should be encouraged to avoid tobacco smoke\(^9\), as smoking increases the risk of many cancers.

To help maintain good health, survivors should also:

- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight\(^10\)
- Adopt a physically active lifestyle\(^11\)
- Consume a healthy diet\(^12\), with an emphasis on plant foods
- Limit consumption of alcohol\(^13\) 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\(^14\) for more information about causes of second cancers.

**References**

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If Thyroid Cancer Treatments Are No Longer Working

If cancer keeps growing or comes back after one kind of treatment, it may be possible to try another treatment plan that might still cure the cancer, or at least shrink the tumors 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, including treatment 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 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, it is important that you 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 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. But this is not the same as treatment to try to cure the cancer.

You can learn more about the changes that occur when curative treatment stops working, and about planning ahead for yourself and your family, in our documents Nearing the End of Life and Advance Directives.
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 document called Hospice Care⁴.

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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