



I'm done with treatment. What happens now?

As your doctor may have told you, once you have had breast cancer, you have a higher risk for developing a new breast cancer than someone who has never had the disease. That is why it is important to get the follow-up treatment and care your doctor recommends. With proper follow-up, your doctor can keep track of how you are recovering — including taking care of side effects. In addition, if there is a local (in the breast, chest wall or lymph nodes) recurrence of breast cancer, it can be detected early when treatment is most effective. Either your primary care doctor, oncologist, surgeon or *you* can coordinate your follow-up care — whichever you prefer. If you are not sure which way to go, ask other people whom they have chosen to coordinate their care, and why. Do not be afraid that you will be left alone, not knowing what to do. You will have the care you need.

Recommendations for follow-up care

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network has established the following guidelines for follow-up of breast cancer treatment:

1. Have a mammogram every 12 months. For women treated with lumpectomy and radiation therapy, have a mammogram 6 months after radiation therapy ends, then of both breasts every 12 months.
2. Have a physical examination performed by a doctor every 4 to 6 months for 5 years, then every 12 months.
3. Understand which symptoms should be reported right away (see box to the right).
4. Have a pelvic exam every 12 months if taking tamoxifen and have not had the uterus removed.

Symptoms that you should report to your doctor

- Any changes in the remaining breast(s) and chest area, unusual pain, loss of appetite or weight, changes in menstrual periods, unusual vaginal bleeding or blurred vision.
- Dizziness, coughing that does not go away, hoarseness, shortness of breath, cough, headaches, backaches, bone pain or digestive problems that are unusual or that do not go away.

Your doctor will examine you and determine the nature of the symptoms and discuss what to do next.

After treatment

For some people, completing their treatment signals a new beginning in life. At the same time, it can also mark the end of constant support and care. When you reach this point, there are many new issues to think about and new issues to plan. Here are a few of the most common ones:

How will I know if the cancer returns?

Before you complete your cancer treatments, set up follow-up visits with your doctor. Regular physical exams and mammograms will help find recurrent or new breast cancer should this occur. Be aware of new changes that occur in your breasts and report them to your doctor right away.

Am I going to feel sick from now on?

No. As you finish your treatment, you may still be tired. Do not fight that — your body needs the rest. Aerobic exercise can help speed the recovery process following treatment.

Side effects like nausea and hair loss are temporary, and should go away after treatment ends. If nausea and other side effects continue, be sure to tell your doctor.

Should I re-establish my usual routine?

Getting back to all the things you used to do, even if it takes some time, will help you feel better. Adding preventive health activities like physical activity, eating a healthy diet and getting regular tests — such as a bone-density test and a colon exam — are the right ways to maintain your health and may also help you have peace of mind.

Will it ever be over?

Believe it or not, there may come a day when you stop worrying about cancer and live your life without fear. It is normal to have some anxiety, but this will lessen over time. You can always get support from groups of women who have gone through what you have, and some who are in the same place as you are now.

Non-standard tests

There are several tests that are not normally considered to be standard follow-up procedure for breast cancer. While there is not enough evidence that the majority of women will benefit from them, these tests are helpful in evaluating any symptoms of possible recurrence. These tests include complete blood counts and blood chemistry profiles, bone scans, ultrasounds or CT scans of the liver, chest X-rays and breast cancer tumor marker tests.

There are often specialized support groups for people at various stages of illness or recovery and self-help groups that are run by breast cancer survivors. These groups can be an important source of information and support.

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636), www.komen.org

American Cancer Society's Reach to Recovery Program
1-800-ACS-2345, www.cancer.org

American Society of Clinical Oncology
1-888-282-2552, www.asco.org

Living Beyond Breast Cancer
1-888-753-5222, www.lbcc.org

National Comprehensive Cancer Network
1-866-788-NCCN, www.nccn.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Getting the Support You Need
- Healthy Living
- If Breast Cancer Returns
- Life After Treatment
- Lymphedema