

What to Know: ASCO's Guideline on Follow-Up Care for Breast Cancer

Introduction

Key Points

- Follow-up care for breast cancer includes coping with side effects of treatment and lowering the risk of recurrence.
- ASCO's recommendations for follow-up care include regular visits to your doctor and mammographies.
- People with breast cancer should talk with their doctors about a follow-up care plan and how to coordinate this care between the oncologist and their primary care or family doctor.

To help doctors give their patients the best possible care, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) asks its medical experts to develop recommendations for specific areas of cancer care. ASCO developed a clinical practice guideline about follow-up care for breast cancer. This guide for patients is based on ASCO's recommendations.

As you read this guide, please keep in mind that every person treated for cancer is different. These recommendations are not meant to replace your judgment or that of your doctor. The final decisions you and your doctors make will be based on your individual circumstances.

Recommendations

The purpose of follow-up care for breast cancer is to help maintain good health after treatment, which includes coping with the side effects of treatment, reducing the risk of recurrence (return of the cancer), and watching for signs of recurrence. ASCO's recommendations for breast cancer follow-up care are listed in the table below:

Follow-Up Care Test	Recommendation
Medical history and physical examination	Visit your doctor every three to six months for the first three years after the first treatment, every six to 12 months for years four and five, and every year thereafter.
Post-treatment mammography	Schedule a mammogram one year after your first mammogram that led to diagnosis, but no earlier than six months after radiation therapy. Obtain a mammogram every six to 12 months thereafter.
Breast self-examination	Perform a breast self-examination every month. This procedure is not a substitute for a mammogram.
Pelvic examination	Continue to visit a gynecologist regularly. Women taking tamoxifen should report any vaginal bleeding to their doctor.
Genetic counseling referral	<p>Tell your doctor if there is a history of cancer in your family. The following risk factors may indicate that breast cancer could run in the family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ashkenazi Jewish heritage• Personal or family history of ovarian cancer• Any first-degree relative (mother, sister, daughter) diagnosed with breast cancer before age 50• Two or more first-degree or second-degree relatives (grandparent, aunt, uncle) diagnosed with cancer• Personal or family history of breast cancer in both breasts• History of breast cancer in a male relative

Most breast cancer recurrences are discovered by patients between doctor visits. Tell your doctor if you experience the following symptoms:

- New lumps in the breast
- Bone pain
- Chest pain
- Abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Persistent headaches
- Persistent coughing
- Rash on breast
- Nipple discharge (liquid coming from the nipple)

The following tests are *not* currently recommended by ASCO for regular follow-up care because they have not been shown to lengthen the life of a person with breast cancer:

- A complete blood count (CBC) test and liver and kidney function tests
- Chest x-ray
- Bone scan
- Liver ultrasound
- Computed tomography (CT or CAT) scan
- Fluorodeoxyglucose-positron-emission tomography (FDG-PET) scan
- Breast magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) test
- Breast cancer tumor markers, such as CA 15-3, CA 27.29, and carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA).

What This Means for Patients

The recommendations for follow-up care for breast cancer include regular physical examinations, mammograms, and breast self-examinations. The follow-up care may be provided by your oncologist or primary care doctor, as long as your primary care doctor has communicated with your oncologist about appropriate follow-up care. In addition, patients with a possible or known family history of breast cancer should be referred to a genetic counselor. Use these guidelines to talk with your doctor about an appropriate follow-up care plan for you.

Questions to Ask the Doctor

To learn more about follow-up care for breast cancer, consider asking your doctor the following questions:

- What follow-up care plan would you recommend for me?
- What is the risk that the cancer will recur?
- Based on my personal and family medical history, do I need a referral to a genetic counselor?
- Where can I find more information about follow-up care?

For women receiving hormone therapy;

- Are there any additional symptoms I should watch for?
- What side effects are common with this treatment?
- How often should I schedule additional follow-up visits with the oncologist?