

When breast cancer treatment begins, many people think that their last day of treatment will signal the end of this challenge in their lives. But some report ongoing physical and emotional issues that they did not expect. Lasting side effects of treatment and emotional concerns are common. It helps to know what to expect after treatment ends.



Emotional effects of treatment

The last day of treatment

Visions of cake and celebration often go along with thoughts about the last day of treatment. But many report that they feel let down, sad, tired and anxious. One way to help ease into this change is to do something special to mark the day. You may not feel like having a big party, but a quiet dinner with your loved ones or a special outing may be good ways to celebrate.

Will I ever feel normal again?

You may wonder when you will feel like your old self again. Friends and family often think that just because your active treatments are over, you are fully recovered. However, it may take as long as you were in treatment or longer to recover physically and emotionally. Take the time you need before agreeing to new obligations. If you find you have trouble saying “no” it may help to have a script ready. Practice saying, “No thanks, I’d rather not take on anything extra right now.”

Feeling anxious?

One reason you might be anxious is because you are now very aware of every ache and pain in your body. Each pain brings with it the fear of the cancer’s return.

This is normal and will ease with time. If you are concerned about any symptoms, contact your doctor instead of worrying.

The anxiety of medical tests

Follow-up tests, though necessary, can be scary. This is normal. It may help to schedule your tests so that you have the results that same day or the next. Some like to schedule an appointment with their doctor to go over the results, either in person or over the phone, so they do not have to wait for the office to call them. Bringing a family member or friend with you to the appointment to lend support may also help.

The fear of the cancer returning

The fear that your breast cancer may return is a normal reaction. As time goes by, most people report that they think of it less and less often. Getting support from co-survivors (family, friends, health care providers or colleagues who are there to lend support from diagnosis through treatment and beyond) can you help your anxiety. If you find that your fears are not easing over time or that they interfere in your daily life, you should talk to your doctor. You may be suffering from depression. Getting the support and treatment you need is important for your health and the quality of your life.

Physical effects of treatment

Surgery

After surgery there may be scars, changes in the shape of the breast or an absence of breast tissue. It may take awhile to get used to the new look of your breasts. If you have had a mastectomy you may be thinking about wearing a prosthesis or having reconstructive surgery. No matter what you decide, there is no need to rush. If you are thinking about reconstruction, take the time to find an experienced plastic surgeon and discuss the risks and benefits. It may be possible to have reconstruction done on the same day as the mastectomy.

If you had lymph nodes removed under your arm you may be at risk of lymphedema [lim-fa-DEE-ma]. This is a swelling due to the build-up of lymphatic fluid. It can occur shortly after surgery or even years after treatment. Ask your surgeon about what to look for and how to reduce your risk.

Chemotherapy

After ending chemotherapy you may be looking forward to having your hair grow back. Hair grows about a half-inch per month so it may take some time before you are able to style it as you did before. Sometimes when it grows back, it is a different color and texture.

Chemotherapy can cause sudden menopause. The closer a woman is to her natural menopause, the more likely this will happen. In young women, menopause caused by chemotherapy can be temporary or it can be permanent and result in loss of fertility. This sudden physical change comes with all of the symptoms of menopause. Postmenopausal hormone use is not an option for managing these symptoms due to the role hormones play in breast cancer. However, your doctor can help you find other ways to manage these symptoms.

Chemotherapy may also lead to memory problems. This is sometimes called “chemo-brain,” and is a sense of mental “fuzziness” and short-term memory problems. Most women say that these symptoms

improve with time, although no one is sure if they ever return to pre-treatment levels. Talk to your doctor to rule out side effects from medicines or depression.

Weight gain is also a common side effect of chemotherapy. Exercise, such as walking, can help with weight loss and can also help relieve stress. It is also very important to eat a healthy diet. It will help your body heal and control your weight.

Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy may cause fatigue and skin changes. These changes usually start to get better once treatment ends. Some breast changes like soreness, swelling, firmness and color changes can last up to a year or longer.

Hormone therapy

Most side effects from hormone treatments end once treatment is over. Today tamoxifen (Nolvadex) or an aromatase inhibitor (Arimidex or Femara) are prescribed for five years to reduce the chance of the cancer returning. The most common side effects of tamoxifen include hot flashes, vaginal dryness or discharge, weight gain, mild nausea, fatigue, depression and decreased sex drive. The side effects of the aromatase inhibitors include bone pain, hot flashes, fatigue, joint pain, osteoporosis and fractures. Your doctor may prescribe another medication along with an aromatase inhibitor to prevent osteoporosis.

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Aromatase Inhibitors
- Breast Reconstruction and Prosthesis
- Chemotherapy and Side Effects
- Follow-up
- Getting the Support You Need
- Hormone Therapy
- Lymphedema
- Radiation Therapy and Side Effects