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Knowing IS Everything | Because Everyone's Journey IS Different

Physical Effects of Cancer

We'll help you manage any side effects of your cancer and maintain your health.

Surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, transplants, and other cancer treatments are harsh on the body and can have long-lasting effects. As a cancer survivor, you are at a higher risk for second cancers and medical issues that can interfere with your quality of life.

Chronic Pain

Survivors can experience different levels of pain from chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, or other cancer treatments. There are many ways to reduce or eliminate chronic pain. If your pain is moderate to severe, you may need medication or further treatment. If your pain is less severe, you can try some of these to make you more comfortable:

- hot or cold packs
- massage
- breathing exercises
- relaxation exercises
- integrative medicines
- visualization and guided imagery

Cardiovascular Complications

Many cancer treatments can cause cardiovascular complications such as heart failure, myocardial ischemia/infarction, hypertension, thromboembolism, and arrhythmias. It's important that if you experience any symptoms such as shortness of breath, lightheadedness or dizziness, pain in the chest, or swollen hands, or feet you should contact your healthcare team right away.

Switching medications or dosage and changing diets can reduce the risk of heart and cardiovascular issues. Talk to your care team to find out what is best for you.

Fatigue

The causes of fatigue that are specifically related to cancer have not been determined so much of treating fatigue is through symptom management and providing emotional support.

Although fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of cancer treatments, few medications are effective in treating it.



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Sometimes fatigue cannot be treated. Being flexible, planning, and understanding what is happening to you may make it easier for you to deal with your fatigue. There are things you can do to make it more tolerable:

- Keep a journal or log of your daily activities, noting when your fatigue is less and when it is greatest. This way you can adjust your time and plan for activities when you know you can better tolerate them.
- Use your energy for the things that are most important to you. Schedule important daily activities during times of less fatigue and cancel unimportant activities that cause stress. Balance rest periods with activity throughout the day.
- Get some exercise - stretch, walk, do yoga, swim. A few minutes of exercise several times a day will help you maintain your muscle strength and feel more alert. People with cancer who exercise may have more physical energy, improved appetite, improved ability to function, improved quality of life, improved outlook, improved sense of wellbeing, enhanced sense of commitment, and improved ability to meet the challenges of cancer and cancer treatment.
- Practicing good sleep habits such as not lying down at times other than for sleep, taking short naps for no longer than one hour, and limiting distracting noise (TV, radio) during sleep. These actions may improve sleep and allow more activity during the day.
- Share household and family activities. Your responsibility is to ask for help.
- Join a support group. Somehow it makes things better to hear that others have the same problem with fatigue. Talking with others can help you cope with your feelings; family members may also benefit from joining a group.

Neuropathy

Most people with neuropathy complain of tingling or numbness in certain areas of the body, especially the hands and feet. It's caused by interference in nerve pathways in the body and can result from chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, or a combination of these treatments. The discomfort or pain varies from person to person.

Certain medicines can help with neuropathy, as may some complementary treatments such as acupuncture. It's also important to try to prevent injury to the numb areas and to avoid falls due to unsteadiness.



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Second Cancers

Second, cancers are a major concern for survivors. A second cancer is different than a recurrence or reappearance of your original cancer. Radiotherapy and certain chemotherapy used to treat an original cancer can lead to an increased risk of a second cancer. Nearly one in five cancers diagnosed today occurs in an individual with a previous diagnosis of cancer.

Skin Issues

When radiation therapy is delivered from outside the body, it travels through the skin to the tumor, damaging healthy skin cells along the way. This can lead to radiation dermatitis (irritated skin), which can last several weeks after treatment ends. Acute radiation dermatitis generally occurs within 90 days of treatment. Chronic radiation dermatitis may appear from 15 days to 10 years or more after treatment.

Here are some ways to help prevent and reduce radiation dermatitis:

- Wash the treated area gently with warm water.
- Shower or bathe in lukewarm water, no more than once a day.
- Pat your skin dry, making sure not to rub your skin.
- Don't put anything cold or hot on the affected area.
- Use an electric razor, to prevent cuts.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Keep skin moisturized. Ask your doctor about products that reduce itching and swelling.
- Cover the treated area with clothing and/or SPF 50+ sunscreen.
- Drink 2-3 quarts of water a day unless your doctor limits your fluids.
- Talk to your doctor before you use any creams, soaps, or makeup on the irradiated area.
- Report discomfort to your doctor. An untreated skin reaction can lead to infection and delay treatment.

Osteoporosis

It's common for bones to become brittle as you age. Cancer patients and survivors are especially at risk as various treatments for cancer can cause your bones to become thinner, weaker, more fragile, and more brittle. If you have osteoporosis, your doctor may recommend that you take specific medicines and participate in physical therapy to strengthen your bones and lessen your risk of fractures.



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Neurological Issues

Cognitive thinking and short-term memory loss are common side effects of cancer treatments. 75 percent of people with cancer have cognitive problems during treatment and 35 percent have issues that continue for months after finishing treatment.

Here are some things to help cope with and improve your neurological issues:

- Keep a checklist of daily reminders. Place the list in a location where you can look at it frequently at home, at work, or on your smartphone.
- Do one thing at a time and avoid distractions.
- Use a calendar or planner to keep track of upcoming appointments.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Physical activity can increase mental alertness.
- Try learning a new hobby. Doing crosswords or puzzles can help improve cognitive function. Several smartphone apps are available that focus on memory or cognitive function, as well.

Lung Function

If you smoke before, during, or after cancer, the best thing you can do is quit. And the sooner you quit, the better it is. For people who quit before age 50, their chances of getting lung cancer go down significantly.

The beneficial effects of smoking cessation are immediate:

- Within 20 minutes of stopping smoking, people start having slight dilation of the blood vessels, which are tightened because of smoking.
- Within 24 hours, carbon monoxide level starts going down.
- Within one to nine months, shortness of breath symptoms start to improve and the lung functions may show some improvement also.
- In addition to that, within the first one to five years after quitting, the risk of heart attack goes down and the risk of cancers of the esophagus/throat cuts down in half.
- After roughly 10 years, the risk of lung cancer goes down to half.
- After smoking cessation for around 15 years, the risk of lung cancer goes down by 70–90 percent.
- While the risk of lung cancer never goes down to 0 percent. There is always a slightly high risk of lung cancer in those who have smoked, but there is a significant reduction as time passes after cessation of smoking.



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Urinary Incontinence

While most survivors deal with urinary incontinence as a result of prostate cancer, other cancers or treatments can also affect urinary incontinence.

- Stress incontinence: This can cause a person to leak urine during activities such as coughing, laughing, sneezing, or exercising.
- Overflow incontinence: A dribbling stream of urine that happens involuntarily when the bladder is full.
- Urge incontinence: Having to urinate frequently with an urgent need to urinate. Must reach a restroom quickly to prevent leaking.
- Continuous incontinence: Not being able to control the bladder at all, losing a large amount of urine for no apparent reason.

You can try managing incontinence by limiting the amount of fluids you drink, urinating before you go to bed and before strenuous activity, and practicing Kegel exercises. Treatments for more severe issues of incontinence include bladder training, physical therapy, medications, and medical devices. Work with your healthcare team to find a solution to your control issues.

Vaginal Changes

Treatments for cancer such as chemotherapy and radiation can cause changes in the shape and moisture of a woman's vagina which can lead to pain or difficulty during sexual intercourse.

If sex is uncomfortable or painful, use a water-based lubricant during intercourse or try practicing Kegel exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These exercises also help the muscles relax.

Early menopause can also occur as a result of several different cancer treatments and is a serious concern for young women.