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PET scans after cancer treatment

When you need them—and when you don't

If you've been treated for cancer, it's normal to want to do everything you can to be sure that it doesn't come back.

Your doctor will watch you closely for many years to check for a possible return of the cancer. To be extra sure, some doctors will order imaging tests, known as PET scans. They are often combined with CT scans. These scans take pictures of your body where cancer might be growing.

But you may not need the tests. And their risks may be greater than the benefits. Here's why:

PET and PET-CT scans usually don't help people who have completed cancer treatments and don't have symptoms.

For most cancers, these tests don't help you live longer or with a better quality of life. If you are scanned without a good reason, it can lead to anxiety, wrong diagnoses, false alarms, unnecessary procedures, and more costs.

Often, there are better ways to keep track of your condition:

- Be aware of symptoms that could mean cancer has returned. (See Advice column on next page.)



- Get regular checkups that include a medical history and physical exam.
- For some cancers, there are simple tests you should get, such as mammograms for women who have been treated for breast cancer.
- Ask your doctor which test, if any, is right for your situation.

PET and PET-CT scans have risks.

Having PET and PET-CT scans can add to your stress as a cancer survivor. These tests often find health problems that are not serious. This may lead to more tests and procedures, including follow-up scans, and even biopsies and surgery.

Also, PET, and especially PET-CT scans, expose you to high levels of radiation. The effects of radiation add up over your lifetime. This can increase your risk of cancer. Multiple scans should not be done unless medical evidence shows that they would help. Ask your doctor if multiple scans are a good idea.

The tests are expensive.

A PET-CT scan can cost \$7,000 or more, according to one U.S. medical center. That does not include the cost of added tests and procedures due to false alarms. Some insurance plans do not pay for routine (surveillance) PET scans in a healthy patient who has completed cancer treatment.

So, when are PET scans a good idea after treatment?

A PET or PET-CT scan may be helpful if your doctor suspects your cancer has returned, based on your symptoms, a physical exam, or other tests. A scan may also be recommended if you were treated for advanced cancer and your doctor needs to find out if your most recent treatment was effective.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

After you are treated for cancer

See your doctor regularly to check for any return of cancer. If cancer does come back, have it treated as soon as possible.

Ask your doctor to explain:

- Which tests you need and how often.
- Common symptoms that could mean that cancer has returned. (See the list below.)

Tell your doctor about these symptoms or unexplained changes in your health:

- Lumps, bumps, or swelling
- New or unusual pain that doesn't go away
- Bleeding or easy bruising
- Chills or fevers
- Headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Blood in stools or urine
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or reduced appetite
- Unexplained weight loss
- Coughing that doesn't go away
- Yellowing of the skin



The following changes can help you be as healthy as possible:

Quit smoking. Try counseling, nicotine-replacement products, medications, or all three.

Control your weight. Being overweight increases the risk of some cancers coming back. It can also lead to diabetes and heart disease.

Exercise regularly. Aim for 2½ hours a week—or 30 minutes a day. Try walking, swimming, cycling, tennis, or another activity you enjoy.

Eat more plant foods.

Eat many fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Eat fish, poultry, or beans instead of red or processed meats.