

Cancer Survivorship



MINNESOTA ONCOLOGY

mnoncology.com



This guide includes survivorship topics on:

What is Cancer Survivorship?	4
Understanding the New Normal of Cancer Survivorship	5
Survivorship Isn't Something You Have to Do Alone	5
WORK	
Adapting a New "Normal" At Work	7
Returning to Work After Cancer	8
5 Tips for Finding Work as a Cancer Survivor	12
Tips for Telling Your Co-Workers About Your Cancer Diagnosis	14
FAMILY	
The Effects of Cancer on Family Life	17
Who Should Get Genetic Testing?	18
Future Fertility for Cancer Survivors	20
Sexuality and Intimacy After Cancer	22
NUTRITION AND EXERCISE	
Nutrition & Exercise After Cancer	26
Living a Healthy Life After Cancer	28
Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors	30
Tobacco Use After Cancer	33
SIDE EFFECTS	
Managing Post-Treatment Side Effects	37
Managing Late and Long-term Side Effects of Cancer Treatment	39
Fatigue After Cancer	41
What You Should Know About Early Menopauses as a Cancer Survivor	44
Heart Problems: A Side Effect of Ongoing Cancer Treatment	47
Survivorship & Chemo Brain	49
Bone Health After Cancer Treatment	52
Long-Term Side Effects of Chemotherapy	54
Managing Dental Health after Cancer Treatment	57
MENTAL HEALTH	
Mental Health as a Cancer Survivor	61
Making Sense of Cancer Recurrence and How to Manage the Fear of It	63
Social and Emotional Changes as a Cancer Survivor	65
Coping with Body Changes After Cancer Treatment	68



SUPPORT AFTER CANCER

Getting Support After Cancer	72
Follow-Up Care for Cancer Survivors	74
Keeping Your Personal Health Records	78
Oncology Social Workers: Guiding Patients Through Survivorship	80

HELPING OTHERS

How You Can Help Others as a Cancer Survivor	83
Making a Difference to Another Cancer Patient	85
Survivor Matching Programs	87





Cancer Survivorship

Being a cancer survivor goes deeper than simply completing cancer treatment. It means you've pushed through unique physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges and come out on the other side. It also means that you're an inspiration to others, even if you aren't feeling like the person you once were. You're living proof that cancer patients can become cancer survivors who live active, full, healthy lives.

Initially, it might be overwhelming to think about what comes next — what you'd like to do with family and friends, your responsibilities, and your future. You might also have moments when you question what you can or should be doing as a cancer survivor, as well as what you should avoid. And, like many survivors, the thought of cancer recurrence may weigh on your mind.



Understanding the New Normal of Cancer Survivorship

The transition from cancer patient to cancer survivor can be quite an adjustment.

While in treatment, you had quick access to your cancer treatment providers, making it a lot more convenient to ask questions about how you're feeling and what's normal. Now that treatment is over, these opportunities are less frequent, which could leave you feeling anxious as you adapt to what your new "normal" should feel like. If you start to feel different or have new side effects, it is important that you reach out to your doctor. It is also important that you go to your scheduled follow up appointments so your physical and mental health can be monitored.

Of course, the number one question on the minds of most every cancer survivor is: will my cancer come back? Because there is no definite way of knowing this, it's unhealthy to obsess over it. Instead, do all you can to

focus on more practical concerns, such as:

- How will you transition back into your pre-cancer roles/responsibilities within the immediate family?
- Will you go back into the workforce? If so, will it be full-time or part-time?
- Are there any post-cancer financial concerns that I need to take care of? If so, how?
- What steps can you take to protect yourself against post-cancer depression and anxiety?
- What is the best way to ensure you're making healthy choices regarding nutrition, physical activity, and mental health self-care?
- How will you deal with friends or co-workers who may not know exactly how to treat you?
- How will you incorporate exercise into your routine that's both effective and safe?

Survivorship Isn't Something You Have to Do Alone

Fortunately, there are many [organizations and resources](#) you can turn to for expert advice on the many questions you and your family may have about cancer survivorship.

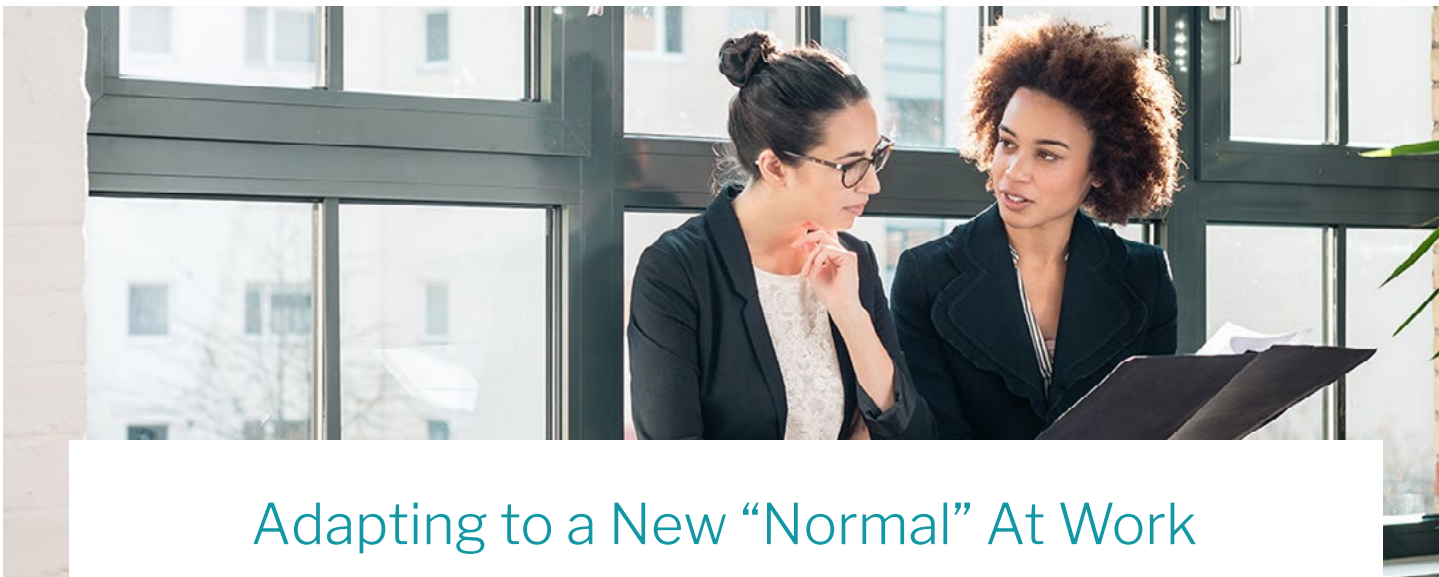
- Consider joining a support group with other cancer survivors who can relate to what you are going through.
- Share what you've learned during your cancer journey by becoming a mentor for a cancer patient. Visit the American Cancer Society website to learn more about how survivors can easily serve in this role.
- When looking for information about a condition or side effect, be sure to seek out reliable online resources.
- Refer to your physician as the primary source of information related to your health.

At Minnesota Oncology, our survivorship providers are here to help you prepare for this next chapter. Be sure to schedule your [survivorship](#) appointment today at any of our [locations](#).



Cancer Survivorship & Work





Adapting to a New “Normal” At Work

If you were employed when you were diagnosed with cancer, you may or may not have taken some time off while you were being treated. For some patients, continuing to work is doable and oftentimes, a welcome distraction from dealing with cancer.

Others, however, take a leave of absence from work while they are being treated, or quit their job entirely for various reasons, including feeling tired, physically weak, and mentally foggy from frequent cancer treatment visits. In cases such as this, taking a break is the best option.

If you stepped away from work during cancer treatment and are ready to go back, it's likely you are faced with feelings of uncertainty regarding how to proceed. You might be wondering how much you should share about what you are, or have been, going through as a cancer survivor, among other things.

In regards to employment, being a cancer survivor can come with its own set of challenges whether you are looking for a new job or re-entering the one you took a leave from. There may be times that certain dilemmas arise, including:

- Does your employer need to know about your cancer diagnosis?
- Has your cancer journey changed your views about the type of job you want?
- Did any of your cancer journey experiences leave you with new skills that could make you more suited to a certain job?
- Are you up for a full-time employment or should you ease back into work with a part-time position?

Regardless of whether you are returning to your former job or starting over, there's no need to succumb to pressure if you truly aren't ready. Pay attention to how you feel and proceed at a speed that makes you comfortable. Most importantly, remember that it's ok to ask others to be patient with you as you find and settle into your new normal.





Returning to Work After Cancer

Even though you know that transitioning from cancer patient to cancer survivor is a major victory, you may still feel a bit defeated at the thought of transitioning to work. And understandably so. After all, it's unlikely that things are exactly the same as they were prior to your diagnosis. Will your ability to perform at your pre-illness level be questioned by your employer and/or your coworkers? Will your pre-cancer workload be too much for you to handle now in the present? Are you confident in your decision to return to your old job or would it be better for you to start from scratch elsewhere?

Because there is no guaranteed way to know how things will go, it's a good idea to prepare ahead of time. By doing so, you can make the transition back into the workplace setting a little smoother. Before you schedule your return to work or set out to look for a new job, here are some things to consider.

Be Realistic About Your Situation

For various reasons, you might feel mentally ready to return to work, but are you actually up for the challenge?

Even if your job isn't physically demanding, certain responsibilities—waking up at a certain time and being alert, responsive, and productive for several hours at a time—can be surprisingly tiring. Additionally, it's rare to have a job that doesn't cause at least a little bit of stress. Is re-entering the world of deadlines, responsibilities, and expectations something that

you're truly ready for? As a cancer survivor, your most important "job" is taking care of yourself. Because of this, it's extremely important that you listen to your body and talk to your doctor and your loved ones. Returning to work can be a tremendously positive milestone—but if the time isn't right, it could be a step in the wrong direction. If you aren't physically and mentally ready to return to work, it can have a negative impact on your health. Don't rush the process—you'll get to where you need to be even if now is not the best time.

Pick a Back-to-Work Schedule Best Suited for You

Even if you and your physician are in agreement about how physically and mentally able you are to return to work, it doesn't necessarily mean a full-time schedule is what's best for you. Oftentimes, transitioning back to work is more successful when you ease, rather than jump into a full schedule. Taking time away from the workplace to fight cancer is a lot different than taking time away from the workplace to "take a break." Cancer treatment can take a toll on you, both physically and emotionally. Be sure to carefully consider if you're fully ready to embrace a 40-hour-work week or if you're better off returning part-time. If your job description allows, you might even consider working from home for a while. However you decide to proceed, it's important to remember that there is no one-size-fits all approach and that listening to your body and making adjustments as needed is what will set you up for success. Fatigue from cancer treatment can last for several months for some survivors, so be prepared for that.

Identify Any Special Accommodations You May Need

When you are a cancer survivor, your work conditions might need to change a bit in order for you to be comfortable. Sometimes, there are physical differences that may require some special accommodations, even if they're temporary. To identify what those are, it can help to make a list of what you know of or suspect you'll need to request in order to be successful in the workplace. This might include:

- Will a wheelchair or walker be needed?
- If standing for a long period of time is difficult can a stool be provided?
- Do you need to have access to a restroom more often?
- Do you need to wear special apparel? This can be especially important to consider if your job requires you to wear a uniform.
- Should you talk with your boss about any possible side effects from the medication you are taking?



Schedule a Call or Meeting with Your Supervisor

Last but definitely not least, take time to have an in-depth conversation with your supervisor before you announce your return to work. Share your excitement to return and use this time to describe any special requirements you may need as well as time away from the job that may be required for follow up appointments, physical therapy, etc. Give them a chance to ask questions to ensure that they better understand how cancer treatment has impacted your ability to work. By working together you can brainstorm solutions that can lessen the challenges many cancer survivors experience at work. This discussion will help alleviate a huge source of anxiety you may feel as a cancer survivor preparing to return to work: fear of discrimination. The good news is that most employers are reasonable and will probably be more than happy to welcome you back after cancer treatment is over. With that said, there are times when an employer won't react positively to your request to return to work because of the special accommodations you need, so be prepared for that.

Hopefully Your Employer Will Give You Their Support

It's understandable that you may worry about how you'll be treated when you return after missing work for an extended period of time due to cancer treatment. Will you be penalized (directly or subtly) after your prolonged absence? If you're able to return to work, but in a weakened or physically disabled state, you may worry about the physical logistics of navigating the workplace. For this reason, certain laws have been set in place requiring employers to accommodate weakened or disabled employees. What's important to know, though, is that there are some gray areas regarding illness-related termination. While federal law does require employers to make a reasonable effort to accommodate qualified job applicants or existing employees who have disabilities, the employer is not required to comply if he/she can prove that providing requested accommodations would create a hardship for the company (i.e., if complying with a request would endanger the company's financial ability to stay in business). Reasonable requests that employers must comply with typically include:

- Allowing an employee to adjust their work schedule, including reducing hours to part-time
- Restructuring an employee's job so it's more tolerable



- Allowing an employee to transition to another open position within the company
- Making changes to make the workplace accessible to those with disabilities (by enlarging doorways, installing ramps, etc.)

The Law is On Your Side

As a cancer survivor, it's only natural that you are concerned about being fired for missing too much work or discriminated against as a result of your illness. Thanks to federal laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act and Rehabilitation Act, you have protection. As long as you are qualified and able to perform your job, your employer cannot legally terminate or demote you for being ill. Additionally, if you weren't working before your cancer diagnosis and decide to enter the workplace after being sick, it is illegal for potential employers to discriminate against you because you have or had cancer. If additional time off is needed for extra treatment or symptom management after you return to work, your job is protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act. Under this law, employees with serious illness can take up to 12 weeks off (all at once or spread out over time) and/or work part-time for a limited time. As nice as it would be to have an employer welcome you back to work with open arms or land a job that's fully accommodating to your needs, the reality is, it doesn't always happen that way. To learn more about your rights as a cancer survivor, make sure to review the [American Cancer Society's Americans with Disabilities Act: Information for People Facing Cancer](#). If you believe you've been discriminated against in a way that has caused you to lose your ability to make a living, you might want to consider scheduling an appointment with an employment lawyer.



5 Tips for Finding Work As a Cancer Survivor



Now that cancer treatment is behind you, you might be ready to start thinking about what's right for your career and for your family. Perhaps you have an interest in returning to your old job if it's available. Or, maybe you'd like to find something new to do altogether.

Regardless of whether you're a cancer survivor, finding the right job can be challenging. With that said, having a history as a cancer patient can make it even more so. The good news is that you're not required to disclose any of your medical history to a current or potential employer. Furthermore, it's illegal for employers to ask about your medical history or require that you take a medical exam as part of the application process. While this does relieve some stress, it doesn't mean you won't experience any at all.

Whether you desperately need to find a job to fulfill financial and/or socialization needs, or you simply want to fill your days with work that you find fun and/or meaningful, the following tips should help you in your search for employment.

1. Determine How Much You Can Handle

Landing a job is only part of the process. Once you have the job, it's important that you set yourself up for success (keeping and thriving at your job). In order to do this, it's imperative that you only take on what you can handle. Cancer treatment takes a toll on the body, and for some, lingering side effects can inhibit the ability to take on any kind of job.

There may be times fatigue zaps your energy level or affects your ability to perform physically demanding tasks. Other cancer treatment side effects like mental foggyiness can make it difficult to focus. Moving forward, carefully consider whether a full-time or part-time position is best. If you want or need a full-time job, only seek out jobs that are within your range of physical capabilities. Be honest with yourself. If you start a job and later realize it's too strenuous, you may have to give it up for the sake of your health.

2. Make Sure Your Skills and Tech Knowledge are Current Before You Begin Applying

If it's been a while since you've worked, consider enlisting friends and loved ones to help you practice your job interviewing skills, in person and on the phone. Additionally, if you're not comfortable around a computer, it's time to fix that. Today, computer literacy is very important. In fact, one of the most effective ways to look for a job is online. Furthermore, technology is commonly used in all industries on the job.

In many industries, technology is constantly evolving—and the more familiar you are with the computer, the more likely better opportunities will open up for you. If you've been out of the workforce for more than 6 months, ask peers in your desired line of work about the technologies and software programs they use on the job. Then, take time to brush up on them. That way, when an interviewer asks you if you have those skills you can truthfully say you do.



Another thing to keep in mind is your social media presence. If you have accounts on various platforms, it's a good idea to search for yourself online to see what comes up. Oftentimes, hiring companies search the names of potential job candidates. If you find anything that could damage your opportunity to find a job, consider removing it.

3. Plan Ahead for a Successful Interview

As a cancer survivor, long-term treatment side effects can affect how you go about your job search. However, there are ways that you can remain in control. Schedule job interviews during the time of day that you usually feel most energetic. Consider wearing a wig if you're self-conscious about your post-cancer hair. To boost a blah kind of mood, treat yourself to a makeover or a new job interview suit. The more confident you are, the more likely you'll be hired. Interviewers can often detect when a candidate lacks confidence. If you don't believe in yourself, why should they?

4. Understand Your Rights as A Cancer Survivor

Did you know that employers can't discriminate against you because of your status as a cancer survivor? In fact, the Americans with Disabilities Act states that employers cannot legally decide not to hire you because you had cancer. It also requires that employers provide "reasonable accommodations" to help cancer survivors function in the workplace. These accommodations may include acquiring or modifying equipment or devices and allowing for part-time or modified work schedules.

5. Update Your Resume Strategically

Taking a break from work for cancer treatment means there'll be an employment gap on your resume that will need to be addressed. While you can be forthright and explain that you are a cancer survivor who took a break during treatment, it's important to remember that you have the choice not to.

Before submitting resumes, it's a good idea to have yours looked over by a professional. Cancer and Careers provides this service free of charge to cancer survivors. You simply answer a short questionnaire and upload your resume to their website so it can be reviewed by a career coach. Within 7–10 business days, you'll receive professional advice about how to improve your resume.

Use Available Cancer Survivor Resources

As a cancer survivor, it might take some time until you're accustomed to being independent again. That does not mean that you have to do it alone! You can and you should take advantage of cancer survivor resources, including oncology social workers, career counselors who specialize in helping survivors, and occupational therapists who help survivors adapt to long-term physical side effects. Be sure to speak with your cancer care team to see what resources are available to you.

Remember, taking the time to prepare both physically and mentally before launching your job search can increase your likelihood of success. Do your homework before you get serious about your job search. Then, when you feel ready, set out with confidence and optimism!



Tips for Telling your Co-Workers About Your Cancer Diagnosis



When it comes to your medical history and health concerns, what you choose to divulge is up to you. At the time of your cancer diagnosis, you may have decided to keep that information to yourself rather than sharing it with your coworkers. Now, as a cancer survivor ready to return to the workplace, you will once again need to decide how much information you wish to share.

While you could keep your cancer diagnosis a secret from coworkers, it really isn't practical. After all, it's likely you'll look different when you return to work than you did when you left. You may be wearing a wig or your hair may be growing back. Perhaps you lost a significant amount of weight. Maybe you have some obvious lingering side effects from cancer treatment. If you don't provide some sort of an explanation for these physical changes, your coworkers will probably worry about your overall health. When you do tell them, prepare for questions— but try to remember that it's mostly out of concern for you!

Another good reason for telling your coworkers about your cancer diagnosis is to clarify why you've been absent. Regardless of how much work you missed, it's likely that your coworkers had to cover for you. Knowing that you missed work to undergo cancer treatments rather than missing for vacation will leave them feeling much more gracious and understanding about temporarily taking on your workload.

Again, how much information you divulge and how you approach these conversations is up to you. If you aren't comfortable with being very open about your cancer journey, only share the highlights. No matter what

you choose to share, just remember that most of your coworkers, including your boss, will be most concerned about how you're doing physically and emotionally. To make it easier to share your cancer journey with coworkers, we've compiled some tips to get you started.

Decide What Information You're Comfortable Sharing

Are you one who's comfortable discussing your medical issues openly? Or, do you prefer keeping it general?

- **Minimalist:** Keep it short and sweet by simply saying you missed periods of work because you had cancer.
- **Somewhat open:** Maybe mention that you missed work to undergo a few different types of treatment for breast cancer.
- **Pretty open:** Talk about undergoing chemotherapy and mastectomy to treat your breast cancer. You might even provide more detailed information regarding the medicines you took, since there might be a coworker who can relate to a similar experience.

Whether you share a little or a lot about your situation, make sure to set boundaries if needed. Will this be something that can be talked about more? Or, do you prefer it to be the end of the conversation?



Anticipate Questions You Don't Want to Answer

Naturally, there will be curious coworkers who would like more details. You might find that their questions seem too personal, but try to maintain perspective. They probably do not mean to pry. Oftentimes, they just want to help or share stories about their loved one's cancer experiences. But if hearing those stories makes you feel uncomfortable, it's okay to explain that. Simply be honest by saying something like, "I know that many of us have had friends and family go through this. It's not easy. Hearing others' stories right now isn't really something I can handle at the moment, but maybe one day I'll be ready to talk."

More often than not, coworkers will respect your boundaries. However, if you encounter people who simply can't keep their curiosity to themselves, be ready with a response that will stop the conversation. Let them know that you'd prefer to talk about something else. Or, be more direct, letting them know you don't feel comfortable sharing the details of your cancer diagnosis.

Decide Who to Tell

If you prefer to only tell a limited amount of people at work about your cancer diagnosis, make sure to tell them to keep your confidence. If you are being selective about who you tell, think about your reasons for sharing your story in the first place. Is it because you want to explain why you were absent from work for such a long period of time? Are you looking for emotional support? Would you like to put an end to rumors and speculation? Are you experiencing long-term cancer treatment side effects that may affect your job performance? Do you simply want to be able to talk openly about your feelings? Answering these questions can be helpful when deciding which coworkers to tell.

Additionally, how much you share with coworkers typically depends on how closely you interact with them. People you interact with daily will probably need a little

more information than those who work in a different department. Being more forthcoming with those you work most will be especially helpful in times when you'll be out for things like follow-up visits with your doctor. Of course, you'll probably feel more comfortable sharing more information with coworkers you've become friends with. For those you don't interact with very often, but who may notice your absence, a less-detailed explanation should suffice.

Decide How to Tell

If only a select few coworkers will be finding out about your diagnosis, you might feel more comfortable telling them one on one over lunch or within the privacy of your office. If it's a specific department or team you're telling, it might be easier to gather them together so you can tell them at the same time. If you're telling your entire company, sending out an email might be the way to go.

Remember, how, when, where, why, and with whom you share your cancer experiences is totally up to you. There is no right or wrong way to go about it. There is only a way that is right for you. While you might not want to be the center of attention or treated differently, it wouldn't hurt for you to have some extra TLC as you deal with this new adjustment. Don't be surprised to see patience and understanding from your coworkers (or even some extra help here and there). Take it all in stride and don't be afraid to accept help if it makes sense for you.



Cancer Survivorship & Family





The Effects of Cancer on Family Life

A cancer diagnosis isn't something that only affects you— it also affects the important people in your life. Even after treatment ends, the emotional and physical changes cancer leaves behind can cause a ripple effect that can be felt by not just you, but the entire family as well.

One common concern of cancer patients' children, grandchildren, and siblings is, "Will I get cancer, too?" Depending on the cancer, that answer could be yes, considering some cancers, such as breast, ovarian, endometrial, pancreatic, colorectal, and prostate cancers, could put blood relatives of cancer survivors at an increased risk of developing them. [Genetic risk evaluation](#) can help determine the risk for relatives.

Another concern among couples of child-bearing age is, "Will we be able to conceive a child?" Again, the answer varies. Your oncologist likely told you that cancer treatment could affect fertility and discussed [fertility preservation](#) with you. Therefore, you may have preserved eggs or sperm in advance and you and your partner will need to discuss how to proceed. If you didn't address fertility before treatment, trying to conceive a child could leave you feeling stressed and anxious.

Whether you want to conceive a child or not, you and your partner may have [concerns about sex and intimacy](#). You both may wonder, "Is it OK to be sexually active?" Sometimes, cancers and cancer treatments do impact sexual function. At times, you might feel self conscious about your body image and your partner may worry about causing you discomfort.

It's important to remember that all of these questions and concerns are completely normal. The good news is that with time and open communication, you and your family will find yourselves focused less on cancer and more on enjoying normal life together.



Who Should Get Genetic Testing?

As a cancer survivor, it's only natural that you'd be concerned about how your cancer diagnosis would affect your family members in regards to their cancer risk. And while encouraging your blood relatives to pursue genetic testing might seem like the logical thing to do, it's important to understand that genetic testing is only helpful in predicting cancer in a small percentage of individuals.

When It Comes to Cancer Risk Lifestyle Trumps Genetics

According to experts, only 5% to 10% of cancers are related to genetics. That's a small percentage! And only certain types of cancers, such as breast cancer, ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer, prostate cancer, colorectal cancer, and pancreatic cancer are more likely to be hereditary. When you think about it, that's actually very good news. While you have no control over your genetics, you most certainly do have control over the lifestyle factors (smoking, excess drinking, unhealthy eating habits, not exercising, excess sun exposure) that increase your cancer risks. For certain individuals, though, genetic testing can be incredibly beneficial.

When Is Genetic Testing for Cancer a Good Idea?

Before making a final decision about genetic testing, it's a good idea for you and/or your loved ones to create a family cancer history map. Your primary focus should be on filling in the cancer histories of as many first-degree (parents, siblings, and children) and second-degree (grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews) relatives as possible. Genetic testing may be beneficial if one or more first- or second-degree relatives has been diagnosed with:

- Being diagnosed with cancer when younger than 50 years of age
- A genetic mutation such as BRCA1 or BRCA2
- Ovarian cancer, regardless of age
- More than 20 colon polyps
- Cancer in a pair of organs, such as in both breasts or both kidneys
- The same type of cancer that you have been diagnosed with



- Rare cancers including sarcoma or male breast cancer
- Two or more different types of cancer that have occurred independently in the same person

There are other genetic risk factors that should also be taken into consideration. These include certain ethnic predispositions, specifically Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry and/or having three or more relatives who have developed breast cancer, ovarian cancer, pancreatic cancer, and/or aggressive prostate cancer.

If you see any red flags among your family history, your doctor (or your relative's doctor) will likely recommend meeting with a genetic counselor for genetic counseling. A genetic counselor is a trained professional who will be able to further pinpoint the odds of having a genetic mutation that raises the risk of certain types of cancers. The findings of the genetic counselor will determine whether or not genetic testing is something you could benefit from.

The Results of Genetic Testing Can Trigger Strong Emotions

It's important to keep in mind that you don't have to go forward with genetic testing even if you or your loved ones fit the criteria for it. While having answers can be a good thing, genetic testing can be potentially life-changing. Because of this, it's a good idea to consider and prepare for the "what-ifs" before you pursue it. Additionally, when someone discovers they're at increased risk of developing cancer, that may mean their close relatives have the same risk. This means that it may be wise to discuss that with their close relatives and find out if they want to know the results (since the results could affect them, too) before undergoing testing.

Finding out that you are at an increased risk of developing cancer can be scary. However, having that bit of knowledge may allow you to be proactive in ways that will reduce your risk (such as preventive mastectomies to reduce the risk of breast cancer). Furthermore, being at an increased risk for cancer doesn't mean you will definitely develop it. If you would like to learn more about whether or not genetic testing is right for your loved ones, we encourage you to contact us to learn more. Genetic testing is available through many of the Minnesota Oncology cancer centers throughout the state. [Find a location convenient to you.](#)



Future Fertility for Cancer Survivors

If you are of childbearing age, it's likely you had a conversation with your oncologist prior to starting cancer treatment regarding your future ability to have children. The two of you may have also talked about ways to preserve your fertility, such as collecting and storing healthy eggs or semen before beginning cancer treatment for use after treatment.

Now that your cancer treatment has ended, you might feel ready to start or grow your family. But as excited as you are, you might also feel nervous about the unknowns. Here are answers to some of the most common questions cancer survivors have as they consider expanding their families. Keep in mind that fertility often depends on the type of cancer you had as well as the type of treatment you received. Therefore, the most accurate answers will come from your cancer care team as they will better understand your current situation.

Common Survivor Concerns About Post-Cancer Fertility

After cancer treatment, will I be able to conceive a child?

The answer to this question varies based on a few different factors including the type of cancer you had, the treatments you received, and how your body responded.



Women

- **Chemotherapy** - Certain types of chemotherapy can cause egg damage and infertility. [View the list on the American Cancer Society website.](#)

Various chemotherapy drugs can also weaken the heart, which could result in a dangerous pregnancy or early menopause (the absence of menstrual period which causes permanent infertility.)

- **Radiation therapy** - Both internal (brachytherapy) and external radiation given to organs such as the abdomen, pelvis, lower spine, ovaries, uterus, pituitary gland, can reduce a woman's ability to become pregnant after treatment.
- **Surgery** - Surgical removal of all or part of the uterus, cervix, one or both ovaries, or pelvic lymph nodes can hinder a woman's ability to become pregnant or carry a pregnancy to term.

Men

Reduced sperm count is a potential side effect of radiation therapy or chemotherapy. In some cases, sperm production returns to normal over time (usually 10 to 24 months after treatment). In other cases, reduced sperm count can be permanent.



Surgical removal of organs such as the bladder, prostate, one or both testicles, or pelvic lymph nodes may cause infertility in men.

How long should I wait after cancer treatment before trying to get pregnant?

There is no definite rule about how long to wait if your oncologist feels as though you are ready. With that said, there are times when waiting will be recommended. For example, doctors often advise men to wait 2 to 5 years after cancer treatment before trying to conceive a child naturally since cancer treatment can damage the DNA of sperm. Many survivors express concern about their cancer treatments increasing the risk of conceiving a child with birth defects. However, studies have found no increase in the rates of birth defects in children conceived by a parent who has undergone cancer treatment.

For women, most oncologists recommend waiting at least 6 months from the date of their final chemotherapy to try and get pregnant. This is because this is about how long it takes for eggs damaged during cancer treatment to leave the body. In some cases, though, oncologists recommend waiting up to 5 years after finishing cancer treatment to conceive a child depending on whether there are other hormone therapies or other treatments required after chemotherapy and radiation therapy is complete.

Is there a possibility of passing cancer along to a new baby?

At this time, there is no evidence that conceiving a child after cancer treatment increases the cancer risk for that child. However, some cancers are hereditary. Depending on the type of cancer you had, there may be an increased risk that your child will develop that cancer during their lifetime. This does not guarantee that your baby would develop cancer, it simply means his or her risk may be higher than that of the general public. Cancers known to be passed down through generations include breast, ovarian, colorectal, and prostate cancers. If you were diagnosed with one of these cancers, you

may want to talk to your oncologist about genetic counseling and genetic testing.

Regardless of Your Post-Cancer Fertility, You Can Still Become a Parent

If cancer treatment left you infertile and you did not take steps or know you could have taken steps to preserve your fertility before treatment (such as freezing your eggs or sperm) there are still several ways to become a parent. Thanks to donor eggs, donor sperm, surrogates who will carry your fertilized embryo to term, adoption, etc., you can still have the family you've dreamed of, even if your journey to parenthood is different than the journey you had envisioned.

Both partners also may be curious about whether they'll be able to achieve orgasm due to a lowered sex drive. It may also take time to adjust back into a romantic partner relationship now that the patient/caregiver relationship that may have existed during treatment is no longer necessary.



Sexuality & Intimacy After Cancer

Now that cancer treatment is over, some adjustments will need to be made moving forward. This may include going back to work, reminding yourself that you can return to old activities, and even accepting the fact that you're no longer "sick." Another issue that most cancer survivors need to face is sexual intimacy. In fact, nearly 60% of cancer survivors report experiencing sexual dysfunction after treatment according to one poll conducted by LIVESTRONG. Additionally, long-term concerns regarding physical intimacy were reported among as many as 85% to 90% of prostate, breast, and gynecologic cancer survivors.

Common Emotional Concerns Regarding Sex after Cancer

Sexual concerns after cancer can be both mental and physical in nature. Emotionally, both partners may feel nervous about having sex after one of them has had a serious illness. A survivor's partner may be concerned that they are pressuring or causing physical pain to his or her partner. A survivor may be worried that his or her partner will have a negative response to the look of their body if it has been changed by cancer. These "body image issues" involve your mind (how you now feel about your body) and your body (your new physical appearance).

Physical Symptoms of Sexual Dysfunction

While not all cancers and their treatments are associated with specific symptoms of sexual



dysfunction, some do. The following symptoms do not affect all survivors but are considered relatively common. The good news is that many of these symptoms will eventually go away.

Breast Cancer

- Loss of sensation, fatigue, and symptoms related to reconstructive surgery (such as feeling discomfort while getting used to implants) may be experienced by those who had a mastectomy (removal of one or both breasts)
- Patients who undergo a lumpectomy may experience decreased sensation in their breasts and nipples, and lymphedema
- Breast cancer patients who receive chemotherapy, radiation, or hormone therapy could experience
- menopausal symptoms (mood swings, vaginal dryness, vaginal atrophy, and lowered libido or sex drive), fatigue, increased scarring and lymphedema

Colorectal Cancer

- Bowel/bladder changes and complications associated with ostomies/stoma could be experienced by colorectal patients who receive surgery and/or radiation therapy



Prostate Cancer

- Patients diagnosed with prostate cancer who receive surgery may experience erectile dysfunction (inability to achieve or maintain an erection), difficulty climaxing, dry orgasm, and decreased libido
- Erectile dysfunction (ED), lowered libido, hot flashes, and gynecomastia (growth of breast tissue) may affect prostate cancer patients who received hormone treatments

Gynecologic Cancers: Including Ovarian, Cervical, Vulvar Cancers, or Endometrial (Uterine)

- Gynecologic cancer patients who receive chemotherapy or radiation may experience low libido, menopausal symptoms, fatigue, increased scarring, bowel and bladder issues
- Having a hysterectomy could result in loss of sensation, menopausal symptoms, fatigue, lymphedema in lower extremities, and/or prolapse (when the uterus, bladder, vagina, or surrounding structures begin to fall out of their normal positions)

Communication is Key

The key to a healthy and fulfilling sex life after cancer is communicating openly and honestly with your partner. Sharing your anxieties and fears with your partner is the first step toward restoring a sex life that satisfies you both. Not only is discussion healthy, it's the only way to truly resolve issues. And, a lot of times, couples discover that their biggest fears were all in their head.

Intimacy is a topic that can sometimes be difficult to talk about. In cases such as this, individual and/or couples counseling can be very helpful. If you're experiencing anxiety surrounding your sex life, take time to have an open and honest conversation with your oncology team or another healthcare provider. They will most likely be able to recommend therapists, and tools and techniques to improve your libido and sexual function.



Strategies for Improving Sexual Desire and Function

It's important to remember that physical symptoms, emotions, and relationships look different among cancer patients. There is no one-size-fits-all regimen for getting your sex life back on track after cancer. With that said, there are some suggestions to consider:

- Make sure you are getting good and enough sleep
- Try to improve your self-acceptance and self-confidence (your partner found you attractive before cancer and may find you even more attractive as a survivor)
- Work on relaxing
- Make time for regular exercise (get the OK from your doctor)
- Talk to your doctor about side effects your medications may be causing (and about re-evaluating medications if needed)
- Use lubricants during intercourse for short-term relief from vaginal dryness
- Use vaginal moisturizers daily for long-term relief from vaginal dryness
- Ask your doctor about estrogen as a possible remedy for vaginal symptoms
- Consider therapy or medication if you have anxiety/depression
- Experiment with different sexual positions and/or sexual aids
- Practice pelvic floor (Kegel) exercises to strengthen pelvic muscles

Remember, adjusting to life after cancer takes time. You and your partner have been through ups and downs during your cancer journey— but you've made it through!

Do all you can to enjoy life and rediscover the things you pumped the brakes on during cancer treatment, including intimacy. Be patient and empathic to each other and if needed, consider getting professional help. There are many important components of your overall health and quality of life as a cancer survivor and your sexual health is one of them!

Cancer Survivorship Nutrition & Exercise



A collage of healthy foods including avocados, nuts, salmon, and spinach. The background features a wooden surface with a whole avocado, two halved avocados, a bowl of mixed nuts (hazelnuts, cashews, walnuts), a plate of fresh spinach, and a piece of salmon.

Nutrition & Exercise After Cancer

Eating the right foods and getting enough exercise are two of the most important things anyone can do for both their physical and mental health. This is especially true for cancer survivors.

Achieving and Maintaining a Healthy Weight is Important

Gaining Weight After Cancer Treatment

Weight loss is a common side effect of cancer. Certain cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation can cause side effects like nausea, a loss of appetite, or dry mouth— all of which make it hard to swallow food. The taste and smell of food may have also changed, resulting in foods appearing less desirable. Side effects like this can make gaining weight back after treatment a challenge for many people.

Losing Weight After Cancer Treatment

While some patients need to regain weight after cancer treatment, others may need to focus on losing weight. For some, their medications may have contributed to their weight gain. For others, stress eating might have been the culprit. For others still, lack of exercise due to treatment may have resulted in weight gain and/or loss of muscle tone.

If your cancer treatment left you overweight or underweight, it's important to do all you can to get back to a healthy weight.

If you have questions about how to get to and maintain a healthy weight ask to speak to one of our dieticians.



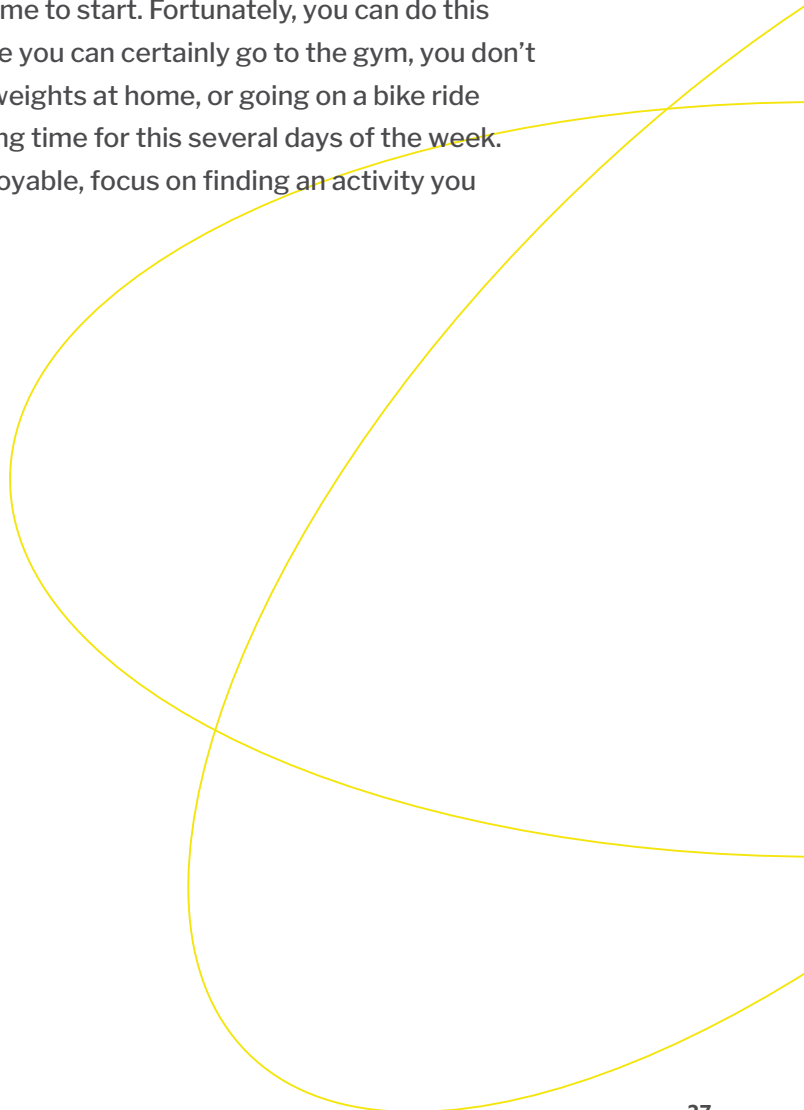
Diet and Exercise Affect Your Weight, and Much More

Foods for Cancer Survivors

It turns out that the expression, “You are what you eat” really is true! As a cancer survivor, now is the ideal time to evaluate your diet and exercise habits so you can stay on a healthy path. What foods are stocked in your pantry and refrigerator? Are there more processed foods than there should be? Is the refrigerator lacking because you dine out frequently? If so, it may be time to re-evaluate your habits— and asking your cancer care team for help is a great place to start. Consider asking them to recommend a nutritionist to help you get on track. Adjusting your diet habits can take time. Start with small steps, continually working towards eating a balanced diet that is not filled with convenience or over-processed foods.

Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

Cancer survivors can also greatly benefit from exercise. If exercise isn’t something you usually carve out time for, now is the perfect time to start. Fortunately, you can do this slowly by adding a little activity at a time. While you can certainly go to the gym, you don’t have to. Taking a walk in the park, lifting light weights at home, or going on a bike ride are enough. The goal is to be consistent, making time for this several days of the week. To make exercise less of a chore and more enjoyable, focus on finding an activity you actually like.



Living a Healthy Life After Cancer



A lot of cancer survivors say they view their lives in three stages: life before diagnosis, life during treatment, and life after cancer. And if there ever were a silver lining to having cancer, it may be that cancer survivors tend to value and appreciate their health more than people who have never been seriously ill.

Having experienced what it's like to live with and be treated for a serious illness, one main “life after cancer” goal is to focus on making healthier lifestyle choices that can reduce the likelihood of getting cancer again—or any other serious illness for that matter.

Lifestyle Choices that Affect Your Health

As a cancer survivor, it's important to understand that the steps you can take toward living a healthy lifestyle are very similar to the steps anyone (even those who

have never been ill) can take toward living a healthy lifestyle. Wise lifestyle choices can include:

- **Staying physically active.** Regular exercise can contribute to a much-needed boost in both physical and mental health. Even low-impact activities like walking can influence your present and future health for the better.
- **Eating a nutritious diet.** The saying “you are what you eat” has a lot of truth. In general, a diet rich with healthy foods (vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean proteins) will leave you healthier than a diet full of processed, packaged, and high-sugar foods that have been proven to contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and unhealthy cholesterol and triglyceride levels.



- **Watching alcohol intake.** Too much alcohol isn't good for anyone, but if you do choose to drink, do so in moderation. According to the American Cancer Society, women should limit themselves to no more than one drink per day, and no more than two for men.
- **Limiting sun exposure.** Long-term and/or excessive sun exposure can contribute to skin cancer. As often as possible, stay inside during the heat of the day (between the hours of 10 am and 4 pm) when the sun's rays are strongest. Also consider protecting your skin with a broad-spectrum sunscreen of at least SPF 15 that shields out both UVA and UVB rays.
- **Not smoking.** It has been proven time and time again that smoking and chewing tobacco are harmful to your health. A healthy lifestyle has no room for tobacco or vaping.
- **Getting checked regularly by your doctor.** If you do become ill or have concerning symptoms, see your doctor as soon as possible. The sooner the cause is detected and diagnosed, the sooner treatment can begin.
- **Take any medicines as directed.** It is important that you take any prescribed medicine as directed and refill your prescriptions in a timely fashion. Even if you "feel fine," never discontinue a prescription medication without an OK from your doctor.
- **Show up for your regular cancer screening schedules.** Just because you've beaten cancer doesn't mean you should stop getting screened. If you develop a recurrence or a new type of cancer, the sooner it's identified the sooner you can begin treating it.

Healthy Habits are Especially Important for Cancer Survivors

Living a healthier lifestyle can benefit anybody. However, it is especially critical for cancer survivors. According to the American Cancer Society, survivors of many cancers, such as breast cancer and skin cancer, are at an increased risk of developing a second cancer or having a cancer recurrence.

From altering certain thought processes to creating healthier routines, many cancer survivors come to realize that leading a healthy lifestyle after cancer takes work. If your pre-cancer life involved unhealthy habits, such as avoiding exercise, frequently eating fast food, drinking a bit too much, working to maintain your tan, etc., now is your chance to incorporate change. As a survivor, you've entered that third stage of life that can (and should) be the beginning of a new, healthier you.

Keep in mind that as you transition to a healthier lifestyle, you don't have to do it alone! Recruiting family and friends to join you or talking with other survivors at a support group are great ways to stay motivated and hold yourself accountable for the choices you make regarding your health. And, it will benefit them, too!





Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

Once cancer treatment is over, your oncology team will likely suggest that you add physical activity to your routine or maintain what's already been recommended. How much and how often exercise should take place will vary among patients, depending on the type of cancer treatments and surgeries received and side effects that are being experienced.

Physical activity is very important for cancer survivors. Exercise can help you:

- Reduce fatigue
- Boost your mood
- Regain your stamina and strength
- Maintain a healthy weight

According to a study by the [American Cancer Society](#), some cancer survivors can even reduce their risk of cancer recurrence by exercising. Staying physically active can also help reduce the risk of developing other health conditions including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and even other types of cancer. Regardless of where you fall on the post-cancer spectrum, it's never too late to incorporate exercise into your daily routine for better health.

In Early Survivorship, Ask Your Doctor for Exercise Advice

Not all cancer patients are affected by treatment in the same way. Therefore, the ease of beginning an exercise regimen will vary based on how you feel after a prolonged period of inactivity. Because of this, it's a good idea to talk with your oncologist about what he or she thinks you can handle. As a cancer survivor, make sure to ask your doctor questions such as:

- Should I avoid certain exercises or activities?
- What types of activities are safest and most beneficial for me?
- Is strength training (lifting weights, yoga, sit-ups, push-ups) or cardiovascular exercise (walking, running, swimming, cycling) something I should focus on?
- Do I need to try to lose weight or gain it? If so, how much?
- How often should I exercise and how long should each session last?
- Are there resources for group exercise or cancer survivor exercise classes?

What to Consider As a Cancer Survivor When Adding in Exercise

To reinforce the importance of nutrition and physical activity and how it can greatly improve cancer survivors' long-term treatment outcomes and quality of life, the American Cancer Society gathered important information regarding best practices regarding nutrition and physical activities after cancer treatment from a group of nutrition, physical activity, and survivorship experts. A group of physicians published these findings in *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*. Some notable findings regarding physical activity for cancer survivors include:

- Avoid gyms and pools that are open to the public. These are areas where bacteria and viruses may be easily picked up for at least a few months after chemotherapy. This also applies to patients who have a low white blood cell count.
- How you feel will determine how much stamina you have. When fatigued, aim for at least 10 minutes of light exercise but avoid overdoing it or pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion. On days you feel better, exercise for a longer period of time. Some survivors even find relief from fatigue by exercising more often.
- Try to avoid chlorine exposure in a pool or too much sun from outdoor exercise if you have recently completed radiation therapy or have had a skin reaction to your radiation treatment.



- If you have nerve pain (neuropathy) or tingling in your hands or feet, you may feel off balance. In cases such as this, consider riding a stationary bike or walking on a treadmill where you can hold on.

Tips for Transitioning to an Active Lifestyle

Even though you know exercising is necessary to stay healthy and reduce the risk of cancer recurring, committing to an exercise plan can be hard. To make it easier, try making it fun. Not only will you benefit from the physical activity, likely, you'll also be more enthusiastic about it if you enjoy it. Especially in your early days as a cancer survivor, any activity is helpful! Walking your dog or with a friend, light stretching or yoga, taking a bike ride, even dancing around the living room with your grandchildren counts as exercise. According to The American Cancer Society, cancer survivors beginning a new exercise routine should start slowly, choose activities that are enjoyable, and aim to eventually exercise for at least 150 minutes per week.

To avoid overdoing it, break up your exercise time into smaller, more manageable intervals. Rather than going to the gym for 30 minutes one day, exercise at home for three, equally-effective 10-minute stints. Working in frequent, short exercise breaks is often more manageable than committing to one long session. Additionally, if your doctor has recommended that you incorporate both strength-building exercises (like lifting hand weights) and cardiovascular exercises (like walking or jogging) into your routine, you can alternate between the two types of exercise. Doing so helps your body recover more quickly between workouts while keeping you from getting bored or burnt out with your exercise routine.

In this new stage of your cancer survivorship, learning to embrace exercise will help you feel better, thus allowing you to gain a greater appreciation for life. Eventually, exercise can once again become a natural, and even enjoyable part of your daily routine!





Tobacco Use After Cancer

It's no secret that tobacco use is bad for your health. In fact, over-the-counter tobacco products are legally required to include warning labels making consumers aware of the dangers of tobacco— especially the dangers of cancer. If purchasing tobacco, you may see one of the following warnings:

Cigarette Warnings

- SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, and May Complicate Pregnancy.
- SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health.
- SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking by Pregnant Women May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth, and Low Birth Weight.
- SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

Additionally, in 2020, the FDA finalized the “[Required Warnings for Cigarette Packages and Advertisements](#)” rule, proposing 11 new cigarette health warnings, consisting of textual warning statements accompanied by color graphics that focus on lesser-known risks associated with smoking, such as erectile dysfunction, bladder cancer, and cataracts.

Cigar Warnings

- WARNING: Cigar smoking can cause cancers of the mouth and throat, even if you do not inhale.
- WARNING: Cigar smoking can cause lung cancer and heart disease.
- WARNING: Cigars are not a safe alternative to cigarettes.
- WARNING: Tobacco smoke increases the risk of lung cancer and heart disease, even in nonsmokers.
- WARNING: Cigar use while pregnant can harm you and your baby; or SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Tobacco Use Increases the Risk of Infertility, Stillbirth and Low Birth Weight.
- WARNING: This product contains nicotine. Nicotine is an addictive chemical.

Smokeless Tobacco Warnings

- WARNING: This product may cause mouth cancer.
- WARNING: This product may cause gum disease and tooth loss.
- WARNING: This product is not a safe alternative to cigarettes.
- WARNING: Smokeless tobacco is addictive.

There's no disputing that tobacco is harmful to your health. Yet, millions of people use it. In 2018, 11.8% of cancer [survivors](#) aged 18 and older reported being current cigarette smokers. And unfortunately, cigarette and cigar smoking is harmful to non-smokers as well. Secondhand smoke exposure (breathing in smoke from another person's cigarette or cigar) can put people at a great risk of cancer, stroke, and heart attack.

Learn more about [lung cancer screening](#) and the importance of early detection.

Smoking During or After Cancer Treatment

As a cancer survivor, all of the warnings listed above regarding the dangers of tobacco apply to you. There are also several additional reasons why you should not use tobacco products if you've had cancer. Smoking after cancer treatment:



1. May reduce the effectiveness of cancer treatment.
2. Increases the risk of cancer recurrence.
3. Increases the risk that you will develop a [subsequent](#) primary cancer (different cancer than you were already treated for).
4. Increases your [risk](#) of dying if you were treated for smoking-related cancers (quitting smoking will decrease your risk of dying).
5. Has a negative effect on pulmonary and immune function and wound healing.
6. May sabotage your efforts and ability to exercise regularly, which most cancer survivors are encouraged to do to benefit their health.
7. May cause long-term side effects of cancer treatment to be worse.
8. May make achieving financial stability a challenge especially if your cancer caused you financial problems.

Get Help to Quit Tobacco for Good

Ultimately, saying goodbye to tobacco products entirely will be what's best for your health and the health of those around you. While that's often easier said than done, you can succeed if you set your mind to it!

If you're ready to stop smoking, talk to your doctor to help determine the best approach to help you achieve your goal of quitting for good whether it involves slowly tapering the amount of tobacco you use, quitting cold turkey, or using nicotine replacement gum or patches. There are also plenty of other resources available to help you quit. For example, the Minnesota Department of Health has developed a program called [Quit Partner](#), which provides assistance to those who want to stop smoking. The program includes counseling sessions, educational materials, and a 24-hour helpline. Their toll-free number is 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669). If you are not local, most states have a similar program, visit the [American Lung Association](#) for inspiration and advice.

Quitting tobacco is hard, but beating cancer is even harder. If you were able to survive cancer, it's more than likely that you can kick your tobacco habit, too.



Cancer Survivorship & Side Effects





Managing Post-Treatment Side Effects

Now that cancer treatment is over, your oncologist has probably given you the okay to resume as much activity as you can handle. Still, there might be some lingering cancer treatment side effects that are keeping you from doing so.

Ongoing Research Regarding Long-term Treatment Effects

Fortunately, there's good news. According to the National Cancer Institute, the [cancer survival rates have increased and will continue to do so](#), with an estimated 20.3 million survivors by 2026— an increase of 31% (more than 4 million survivors) over a 10-year period. Because of this steady increase in cancer survival rates, the survivors' quality of life has become an area of greater focus.

Take [this study](#) conducted by the University of Australia, for example, where researchers analyzed the pharmaceutical records of nearly 4,000 prostate cancer survivors over the span of 11 years (2003-2014). The results showed that survivors who were treated with a common prostate cancer therapy were at a higher risk of developing various conditions, including diabetes, depression, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, high blood cholesterol (hyperlipidaemia), inflammatory/painful conditions, and gastric acid disorders after their cancer treatment ended.

Another study concluded that gynecological cancer survivors who had undergone radiation experienced more urinary, gastrointestinal, and sexual side effects after cancer treatment than survivors who did not receive radiation therapy.

Due to this high interest regarding the side effects survivors can experience, more research is being conducted to better understand which treatments produce fewer side effects after treatment is over.

Side Effects that Cancer Survivors May Experience

Side effects vary among cancer survivors. Some people experience no side effects at all while others deal with side effects that are long-term. Some long-term side effects of cancer treatment can include:

- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Heart problems
- Mental foggiess
- Sexual health issues
- Sleeping disorders
- Osteoporosis
- Dental disorders

If you are experiencing any of these side effects or any type of pain, be sure to talk with your oncologist or another member of your cancer care team. In addition to their help, they will be able to provide you with resources so you can connect with other survivors who understand what you are going through. With the right support, you can work toward being able to better manage long-term side effects.



Managing Late and Long-term Side Effects of Cancer Treatment



Patients who undergo cancer treatment often experience side effects. Some are considered “late side effects,” meaning they don’t surface until months or even years after treatment has ended, while others are considered “long-term,” in that they were present during treatment but haven’t subsided now that treatment is over. As you move down the path toward recovery, it’s important that you work with your cancer care team so you can better manage either type of side effect should you experience them.

Late and Long-term Side Effects Survivors May Experience

As a cancer survivor, there is no guarantee that you won’t experience residual effects of your illness. Additionally, the specific late- and long-term side effects that you may experience as a cancer survivor will depend on various factors such as:

- Type and location of cancer
- Age and physical condition during treatment

- Family history
- Type(s) of cancer treatments that were given, including dosage amounts of medicines and/or radiation
- Any non-cancer-related health problems you have

Late- and long-term side effects cover a broad spectrum. While some side effects are physical, others affect you emotionally. Examples of these side effects include:

- Fatigue
- Loss of hearing
- Depression, anxiety, and fear of recurrence
- Secondary cancers such as skin, breast, or thyroid cancers
- Digestive issues such as chronic heartburn, diarrhea, and constipation



- Brain changes, including memory loss and problems concentrating
- Eye problems, including blurry vision, sensitivity to light, and trouble seeing at night
- Difficulty breathing or other lung issues
- Infertility and/or early menopause
- Bone, joint, and tissue changes such as osteoporosis, joint pain, and loss of motion in joints, such as your jaw, shoulders, hips, or knees
- Mouth problems such as dry mouth, cavities, or bone loss in the jaw
- Growth, development, and hormonal problems (especially among prepubescent cancer survivors)
- Heart problems, including irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, and heart muscle weakness
- Peripheral Neuropathy, a set of symptoms caused by damage to nerves that control the sensations and movements of our arms, legs, hands, and feet.

Conversations to Have With Your Doctor

As both a cancer patient and cancer survivor, it is very important to talk with your oncologist about what to expect regarding late- and long-term cancer treatment effects. The type of cancer treatment you received will play a big role in what you should keep an eye out for. If you haven't already done so, consider scheduling an appointment very soon so you can discuss these things. Be sure to take notes or bring someone with you to take notes for you.

It's a good idea to ask your cancer care team for a detailed list of all of the cancer treatments and dosages you received that can be kept in a safe place. Should

you develop late side effects months or years down the road, this list can help your doctor provide a quicker diagnosis and treatment plan.

Other questions to consider asking your oncologist or cancer care team can include:

- What steps can I take, if any, to reduce the likelihood of developing these late side effects?
- Are there specific warning signs should I watch out for? If so, what ones should I see a doctor about?
- What are the differences between possible cancer or cancer-treatment "side effects" to watch for versus cancer "symptoms" that might indicate my cancer may have returned?
- Based upon the personal cancer treatments I received, should I be monitored by any medical specialists (like an optometrist or cardiologist) who can watch for late side effects?

The New Normal for a Cancer Survivor

Cancer changes your life in many ways. Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee that you won't be affected in the future by late- and long-term side effects. Again, don't hesitate to talk openly with your cancer care team about what you might experience down the road. By doing so, you'll be better equipped to identify potential cancer treatment side effects so they can be addressed promptly by your doctor.



Fatigue After Cancer

Because the side effects of cancer treatment vary based on the type of treatment as well as the response to it, not all cancer patients will experience the same thing. While some may experience hair loss, others won't. The same can be said when it comes to nausea and vomiting, as well as many other side effects. Fatigue, however, is one side effect that most cancer patients and cancer survivors do share. In fact, it's the most common side effect of cancer treatment both during and after cancer treatment.

What is Fatigue?

For healthy people, fatigue is an extreme tiredness that can often be cured by taking a nap or getting a full night of restful sleep. For cancer patients and survivors, it's not so easy.

When cancer patients and survivors describe feeling fatigued it goes much deeper than tired. Cancer-related fatigue usually doesn't disappear after sleep or rest and can overtake the body differently than it does in a healthy individual. Cancer patients and survivors often describe their fatigue as feeling slow, weak, exhausted, and simply feeling a lack of physical and mental energy. Some cancer survivors experience cancer-related fatigue at some level for months or even years after their cancer treatment ends.



Is Fatigue Something to Be Concerned About?

Surviving cancer takes its toll both physically and emotionally. And compared to the other cancer-related side-effects you have endured, fatigue might be considered more of a nuisance rather than something to worry about.

However, if left untreated, fatigue can have a huge impact on your quality of life. Once cancer treatment is over, you may be anxious to get back to your pre-cancer activities— but there may be times when fatigue holds you back. Fatigue may cause you to:

- Miss work
- Avoid attending social events
- Skip exercise
- Avoid friends
- Shirk daily tasks such as cleaning your house, buying groceries, etc.
- Stay in bed longer than usual
- Experience mood changes
- Feel depressed and/or hopeless

In other words, fatigue can prevent you from enjoying the fulfilling, post-cancer lifestyle you desire and deserve.

Treating Cancer-Related Fatigue

One main cause of post-cancer fatigue is anemia (when the blood circulating through the body does not have enough healthy red blood cells). Because of this, it's a good idea to talk with your doctor about whether or not you should get a simple blood test for anemia. If you're diagnosed with anemia, your doctor may recommend ways to treat your anemia, along with the fatigue.

Treating anemia could involve:

- Altering your diet to include more iron-rich foods like leafy greens such as spinach, red meats, fish, and poultry



- Getting a blood transfusion to increase the number of red blood cells in the body
- Taking prescribed medicine that may increase the production of red blood cells in the body

In addition to treating the anemia, there are other ways to minimize the fatigue itself, including:

- Adjusting any pain medications you are taking
- Taking medication or participating in counseling to alleviate depression
- Incorporating a light exercise regimen you can tolerate despite your low energy
- Getting into a regular sleep routine which includes:
 - going to bed at a set time each night
 - avoiding electronic stimulation for an hour before going to sleep
 - taking less daytime naps

Again, fatigue by itself is not a life-threatening effect of cancer treatment. However, it can have a negative effect on your daily quality of life. If you're experiencing post-cancer fatigue, make sure to ask your doctor or cancer care team for help.



What You Should Know About Early Menopause as a Cancer Survivor



Menopause can be a challenging transition for many women, causing them to wonder about how much “the change” will affect their lives.

Hearing that early-onset menopause can be brought on by chemotherapy can be a shock to young women with cancer. This can make cancer even more difficult to deal with. “Chemopause,” as it’s known within the cancer community, is rarely general knowledge. In fact, most women don’t learn about it until they’ve sat down to talk with their cancer care team. While this change is temporary for some women, it can be permanent for others. Regardless, it’s a big change that can be hard to adjust to. Below is some important information that can help you understand more about what you could face as a cancer survivor in early menopause.

Cancer Treatments that Can Cause Menopause

Various cancer treatment options can trigger treatment-induced menopause, including:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiation Therapy
- Hormone therapy
- Surgical removal of the ovaries

As the name “chemopause” suggests, chemotherapy is seen as the most common cause of early-onset menopause. The reason being is that certain medications used in chemotherapy treatment tend to damage the ovaries. It’s this damage that leads to menopause.

Once the ovaries are damaged, they produce less female hormones like estrogen, which is what causes troubles with menopause, fertility, and other reproductive factors. Without the circulation of hormones like estrogen to regulate the menstrual cycle, a woman’s body will eventually stop releasing eggs from her ovaries and her menstrual cycle will come to a halt.



It's important to understand that the length of menopause varies among patients. Depending on the patient, menopause can last anywhere from the length of treatment to the rest of their life— and unfortunately, there is no guaranteed way to predict the duration of each individual experience. While it can be tough for a woman to hear that there's no answer to when her fertility may straighten itself out, it's a reality of treatment that all women with cancer should consider and be prepared for.

The likelihood of a woman's menstrual cycle returning is dependent on several factors, such as your age before the start of treatment and which drugs are used in that treatment. With that said, it's important to keep a cool head during the process and not bet on any particular outcome.

Symptoms of Cancer Treatment-Induced Menopause

Treatment-induced menopause can add to the many battles cancer survivors already encounter. Symptoms of premature menopause can sometimes be more severe than if menopause had been reached naturally, due to the abrupt nature of treatment-induced menopause. Menopause, both treatment-induced and classic, share many of the same symptoms that include:

- Hot flashes
 - Sensations of heat
 - Redness and/or flushing
 - Spontaneous, sometimes extreme sweating
- Mood changes
 - Irritability
 - Mood swings
 - Depression

- Trouble sleeping
- Concentration and memory issues
- Weight gain
- Vaginal dryness
- Urinary problems
 - Burning pain while urinating
 - Leaking when sneezing, coughing, etc.
- Lower libido and diminished sexual response

It can be difficult to manage so many symptoms when you've already experienced cancer survivorship and are dealing with other side effects of cancer treatment. Even though emotional issues and depression are common factors in cases of typical menopause, women who are struggling with the unique emotional battle of early-onset menopause caused by cancer treatment can experience even more pronounced effects.

When to Talk to Your Cancer Team

If you experience any health and treatment concerns, it is important that you have a talk with your oncologist or cancer care team. Even before you begin treatment, you should have a conversation with your healthcare team about fertility options, concerns, and creating a plan to manage any symptoms you may experience should you be impacted by early menopause.

It's important that you maintain an open line of communication with your cancer care team, both during and after treatment. Doing so can make the difference between living in fear and having hope for the future. The more open and honest you are about your emotions and physical state, the more likely you can find relief through symptom management or reversal methods.



Managing Cancer Treatment-Induced Menopause

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

Hormone replacement therapy that uses estrogens and progesterone can greatly ease the effects of treatment-induced menopause. However, due to the complexity of HRT, this is a topic best discussed with your medical oncologist. Factors including the type of cancer being treated, your age, and the exact hormones to be used in HRT treatment can help determine whether or not you should go through this type of therapy.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are a non-hormonal treatment option that benefits some women. One clinical trial even indicated that women who took antidepressants every day experienced a 61% reduction in the frequency of their hot flashes. Some women may also experience some relief from the emotional highs and lows that can come with menopause by taking antidepressants.

Lifestyle Changes

There are some other, less-direct methods that can be used to manage menopause, which include:

- Consuming less spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol in order to help reduce occurrences of hot flashes
- Wearing light, breathable clothing to help reduce physical discomfort from hot flashes
- Drinking lots of water in order to avoid bladder and vaginal infections from dryness and hormonal changes
- Using water-soluble lubricants to counteract vaginal dryness
- Engaging in regular, gentle exercise in order to relieve emotional symptoms

We encourage you to speak with your Minnesota Oncology cancer care providers if you or a loved one has concerns about, or, is experiencing premature menopause caused by cancer treatment. The more forthcoming you are about your mindset surrounding potential or past treatment plans, the better we can find ways to offer you relief and steer you towards health.

Heart Problems: A Side Effect of Ongoing Cancer Treatment

After completing cancer treatment, some cancer survivors can be at an increased risk of developing heart problems. This often includes side effects such as irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), high blood pressure, or even congestive heart failure. [Other types of treatments that can either cause heart problems or make them worse include some chemotherapies, radiation therapy, targeted therapies and/or immunotherapies.](#)

The good news is that not everyone who receives cancer treatment will develop heart problems. Risk for this side effect varies among survivor's, impacted by factors such as the treatments they receive, as well as their risk for developing heart disease before, during and after cancer treatment. For instance, someone who already had heart problems prior to treatment would typically be more likely to develop new or worsening conditions than someone who didn't have heart conditions before treatment.

According to the American Society of Clinical Oncologists (ASCO), certain factors are associated with an increased risk of developing heart problems following cancer treatment:

- Having radiation therapy administered to the chest
- Receiving high doses of anthracycline in chemotherapy drugs. Some of these include daunorubicin (Cerubidine), doxorubicin (Adriamycin, Doxil), epirubicin (Ellence), idarubicin (Idamycin), and valrubicin (Valstar).



- Being female
- Age, specifically young children and those 60 and older
- Having a person history of high blood pressure, heart problems, tobacco use, obesity, or diabetes

Cancer researchers are studying techniques such as echocardiography, electrocardiography, and biomarker monitoring that could help identify potential heart problems in survivors before symptoms even appear.

Cardiac Problems That Could Arise for Cancer Survivors

Cancer treatment can bring about several different heart-related issues. Because of this, it is important for all cancer survivors to receive checkups from their primary care physician to monitor blood pressure, heart rate, and overall cardiac health. Adding a reminder to your calendar is a good way to make sure you don't forget about these necessary appointments. It's also important that you call your doctor immediately or head to the ER if you experience symptoms such as chest or lung pain, a rapid heartbeat that won't slow down, leg pain, or a hot spot in your leg which is a symptom of a blood clot.



Keep in mind that not all symptoms of heart problems are easily-identifiable. If you are experiencing any of the following, schedule an appointment with your doctor immediately:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Swollen hands and/or feet

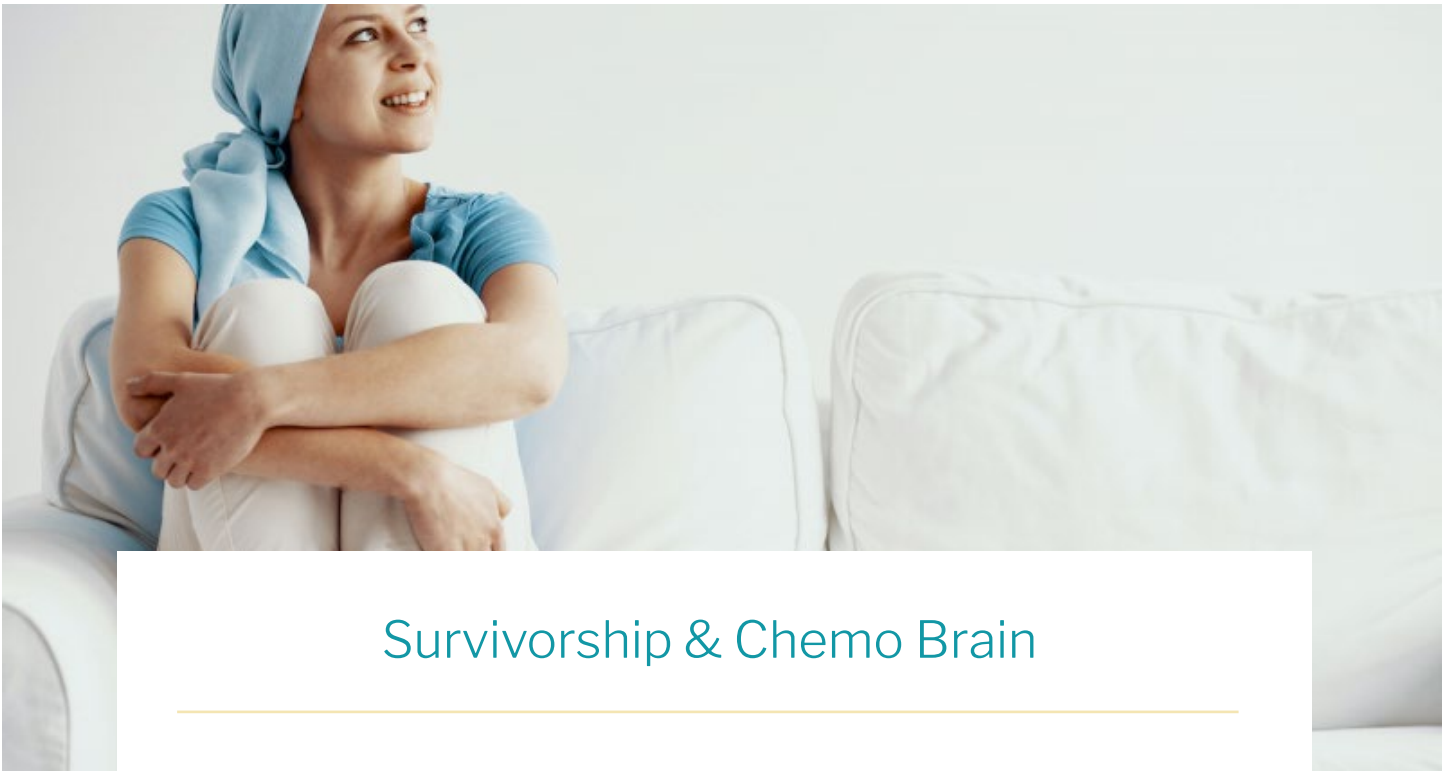
Since your cancer care team is familiar with your treatments, it's a good idea to mention these symptoms to them as well. They may have insight into the types of side effects they see in cancer survivors.

Reducing Your Risk of Suffering Cardiac Side Effects After Cancer Treatment

Symptoms can appear at different times. In some cases, symptoms don't appear until weeks, months, or even years have passed after cancer treatment. Regardless, it's important to help your heart by:

- Incorporating at least 150 minutes of exercise per week into your schedule.
- Eating a balanced diet that limits too much sugar or processed foods.
- Quitting any smoking habits.
- Seeing your doctor regularly for checkups or as new side effects appear.





Survivorship & Chemo Brain

There are several side effects that can arise due to cancer treatment. One of these side effects is referred to as chemo brain— a cognitive decline that may be experienced before, during, and/or after cancer treatment, even if you have not been treated with chemotherapy. Often described as mental “fogginess,” chemo brain manifests itself as having a lack of focus, the inability to concentrate, and trouble processing or remembering information.

Chemo brain may also be called by names, such as cognitive dysfunction, cancer-therapy associated cognitive change, cancer-related cognitive impairment, or post-chemotherapy cognitive impairment.

While chemo brain is short-lived for some patients, other patients may experience it for years.

Currently, research is underway in hopes of finding answers to the many questions regarding the memory changes that cancer patients who receive chemotherapy experience. While researchers still have much to learn, one thing is certain: chemo brain can be a frustrating and debilitating side effect of cancer and its treatments.

Signs and Symptoms of Chemo Brain

Some examples of what a chemo brain experience looks like include:

- Having a hard time concentrating, focusing, or paying attention

- Sudden loss of organizational skills and/or ability to multitask
- Forgetfulness or memory lapses
- Disorientation or extreme confusion
- Difficulty recalling or remembering details like names, dates, and common words

The severity can range greatly among patients with some signs being much more obvious or debilitating than others. Some people don't notice them at all. Oftentimes, these changes go unreported to the cancer care team until they begin to interfere with the patient's everyday life.

Causes of Chemo Brain

There is no definite cause of chemo brain. What's even more puzzling is that those who have never had chemotherapy, can be vulnerable to experiencing these symptoms. Because of this, it has been suggested that it could be a combination of factors including:

- The cancer itself (particularly brain cancer)
- Age at the time of diagnosis
- Cancer treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, or targeted therapy
- Surgery and the anesthesia used during surgery
- Other illnesses, such as high blood pressure and diabetes
- Medications, such as antibiotics, antidepressants, heart medications, anti-nausea medications, or pain medications
- Anemia (low red blood cell counts)
- Infection
- Fatigue

- Sleep issues
- Poor nutrition
- Stress and emotional strains that often occur with a cancer diagnosis and treatments

11 Tips for Managing Chemo Brain

It takes some work, but it is possible to sharpen your mind and manage chemo brain. Here are some tips to help you cope:

1. Keep track of your schedule and create reminders on a planner, computer, or smartphone.
2. Make a list that consists of important information such as phone numbers, addresses, meeting notes, and even movies or books you're interested in.
3. Rest often and get enough sleep at night.
4. Enrich your diet by including brain-boosting foods such as broccoli, beets, celery, and dark leafy greens.
5. Create more structure within your routine by blocking off certain amounts of time to accomplish specific tasks. Time blocking is a simple, yet powerful technique that can increase motivation, improve focus, boost efficiency, and reduce stress.
6. Only take on one task at a time, making sure to avoid distractions.
7. If possible, add regular exercise into your routine. Light to moderate activity is good for the body and the mind, even during cancer treatment, if approved by your oncologist.
8. Jot down any memory issues, including when they happen as well as what's going on at the time they occur (medications that you've taken, time of day, situation, etc). Doing this can help make it easier for your doctor to find the root cause. Ask for help when you need it and be sure to tell your friends and loved ones when you experience symptoms of chemo brain. Their support can make a big difference!



For long-term chemo brain issues, your doctor may prescribe other methods to help manage them. These may include:

9. Medications, such as antidepressants, stimulants, cognition-enhancing drugs, and drugs like morphine, which block how narcotics work.
10. Occupational therapy and vocational rehabilitation to help patients handle job-related skills and the activities of daily living.
11. Cognitive rehabilitation and cognitive training, which can help improve cognitive skills and coping abilities.

Remember, it's wise to keep track of the important facts so you will be able to have a thorough discussion with your doctor. You may even want to take a friend or family member with you so they can help take notes and review them with you later on.

In addition to talking with your cancer care team, consider being open and honest about your feelings with friends and family. Sometimes, all it takes to feel better is to have a talk with someone you trust and care about.

When to Talk With Your Oncologist

If you experience any symptoms of chemo brain, it's a good idea to talk with your doctor. He or she will want to know when the problems started and how they affect your daily life, so it is important to make a note each time you experience issues.

Some questions you might want to ask your doctor could include:

- What is the cause of my chemo brain?
- Are there steps I can take to improve my memory or my ability to focus?
- How long should I expect my symptoms to last? Is there treatment for my symptoms?
- Would I benefit from participating in any type of therapy?
- Is there a specific type of doctor who can help me with this? If so, can you recommend one?





Bone Health After Cancer Treatment

Osteoporosis is a condition in which there is a decrease in the amount and thickness of bone tissue. This causes the bones to become thin and develop holes that make them weak, brittle, and more likely to break. While this common bone condition is often associated with aging, genetics, or unhealthy lifestyle choices, both cancer and its [treatments](#) can also be a root cause.

Specific causes can include:

- Certain types of cancers including multiple myeloma and breast, lung, ovarian, prostate, bone and testicular cancers
- Various metastatic cancers (cancers that have spread throughout the body)
- Certain chemotherapy drugs
- Aromatase inhibitors including Arimidex, Femara, and Aromasin
- Immunosuppressive medications that slow or stop the immune system, including methotrexate

- Androgen-deprivation therapy (ADT) that reduces hormones levels
- Steroid treatments

While you can't avoid certain risk factors or cancer treatments, you can learn more about known long-term side effects, like osteoporosis, so you can be better prepared should you experience them after cancer treatment.

Symptoms of Osteoporosis After Cancer Treatment

Because your cancer treatment may have increased your risk of developing osteoporosis, it's a good idea to know what to look for. Talk with your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms of bone loss:

- Back and/or joint pain or stiffness
- Pain, swelling, and/or infection in the jaw
- Becoming shorter over time



- Stooped posture or curved upper back
- Breaking a bone after a minor injury or fall

Keeping Your Bones Healthy After Cancer Treatment

Fortunately, all individuals, including those who have had previous cancer treatment, can improve their bone mineral density by incorporating physical activity and other healthy lifestyle strategies.

If you have not yet developed osteoporosis, you can lower your risk of developing it in the future by:

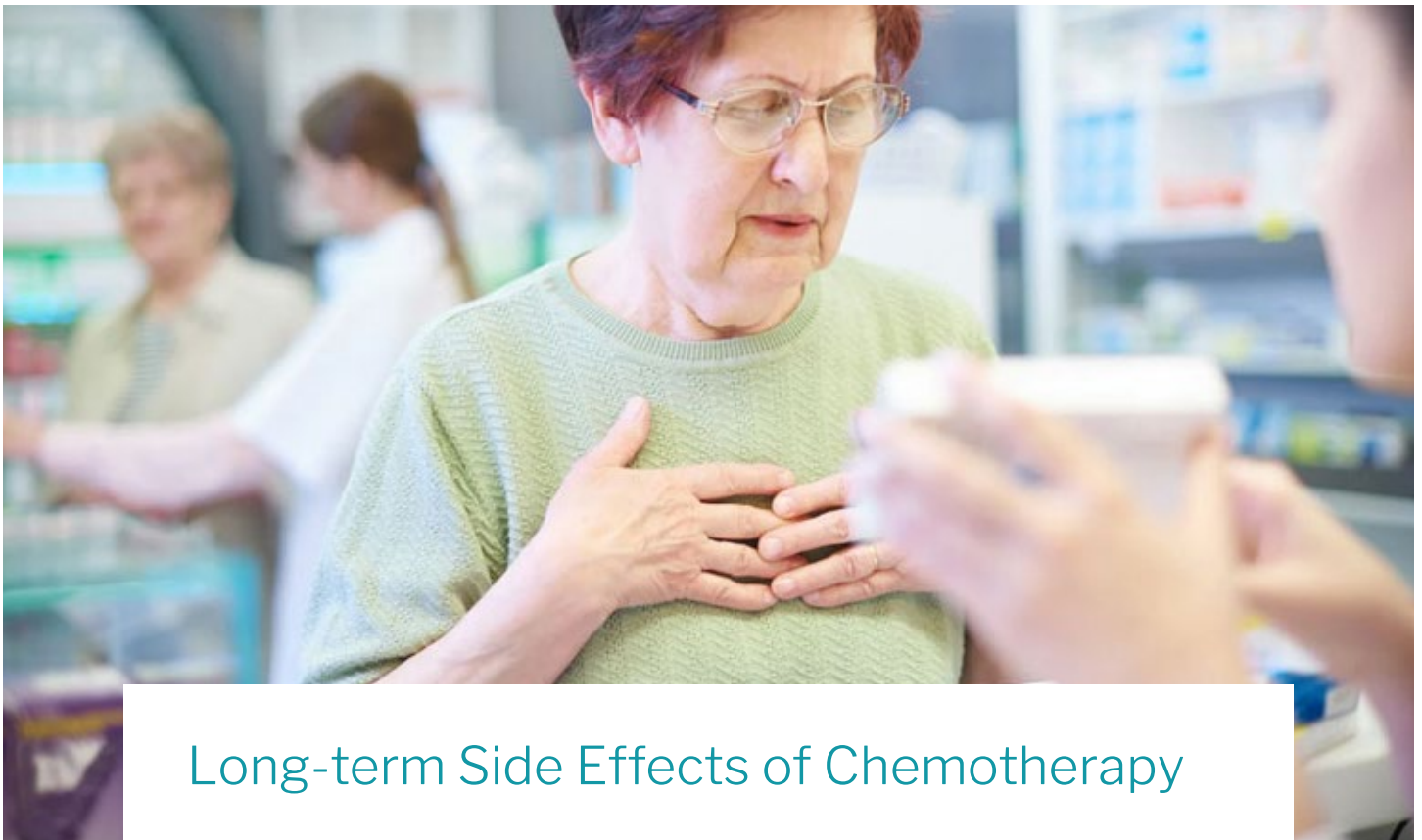
- Getting regular exercise
- Avoiding tobacco
- Limiting alcohol consumption
- Eating foods rich in calcium and vitamin D
- Seeing your doctor as recommended

If you have developed osteoporosis as a result of your cancer treatments, you should also follow the advice above. Your doctor may also prescribe prescription medications that block cells that destroy bones, reduce new bone damage, and promote healing. In addition, he or she might recommend that you take calcium and vitamin D supplements (recommended dosages vary so it's important to talk to your doctor before taking any supplements.)

It's especially important to stay physically active and maintain a healthy weight if you already have osteoporosis. Regular exercise triggers the body to create new bone cells, while being underweight can contribute to bone loss. Additionally, take the proper precautions to reduce your risk of tripping and falling. This can include decluttering your living space, wearing shoes that fit well, focusing on exercises known to improve balance, having your vision checked regularly and wearing corrective lenses if needed.

Osteoporosis is a disease that develops over time and cannot be seen or felt. Since you are at an increased risk of developing bone problems as a cancer survivor, be sure to ask your doctor if you could benefit from periodic bone mineral density tests. This quick, easy test measures the thickness of your bones and can determine if you have normal bones mass, low bone mass (osteopenia), or osteoporosis.





Long-term Side Effects of Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is often necessary for many cancer patients because of its effectiveness at killing fast-growing cancer cells throughout the body. Unfortunately, chemotherapy also kills fast-growing healthy cells, putting cancer patients at risk of developing both short- and long-term side effects.

Typically, it's the short-term side effects most people are familiar with. These can include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fatigue
- Hair loss
- Weight loss due to lack of appetite
- Skin changes, such as dryness, flushing, and darkening
- Mouth sores and/or dry mouth
- Bitter and metallic changes to the sense of taste

While these short-term side effects will go away after treatment, there are times when other side effects stick around much longer. Some of the following long-term

side effects may be experienced immediately after chemo, while others might not become apparent until months or even years have passed since the end of treatment.

Mental Fogginess

Cognitive dysfunction, also referred to as “chemo brain,” is a common symptom during chemotherapy treatment. For some patients, though, it can continue years after treatment ends. Symptoms are usually mild and include memory problems, trouble concentrating, and difficulty multitasking. Making lists of things you need to do or want to remember, jotting your schedule and important dates on a calendar, and using a pill organizer to keep track of your medications can be effective ways to help you manage the effect that chemo brain has on your daily life.

Bone & Joint Problems

Chemotherapy drugs may cause thinning of the bones, called osteoporosis, especially in cancer survivors who are not physically active. To reduce your risk of developing it, exercise regularly, avoid tobacco and alcohol, and eat foods rich in calcium and vitamin D, such as dairy products, fatty fish, orange juice, and egg yolks.

Early Menopause

Chemotherapy, as well as other cancer treatments, are linked to menopausal symptoms in some women. For this reason, pre-menopausal women who had chemo should have their blood tested regularly to measure their hormone levels. In women under the age of 40, menstrual periods may return after treatment ends. However, these women may still go through menopause earlier than normal. Women over 40 are less likely to have their menstrual periods return.

Dental Problems

Chemotherapy is also known to cause damage to tooth enamel, which could make some patients more prone to dental problems, such as dry mouth and gum disease. Weakened tooth enamel can also increase the risk of cavities. Survivors should get regular dental checkups, so a dentist can detect and repair dental problems before they become advanced.

Weight Gain

A common side effect of chemotherapy is weight gain, especially in women whose chemo triggered early menopause. On average, 5 to 15 pounds may be gained. This is primarily due to chemotherapy drugs that cause changes to the metabolism, combined with being less active during cancer treatment. If you're struggling with post-treatment weight gain, try to incorporate exercise into your routine, eat three



meals per day, and avoid snacking between those meals. Also, aim for a well-rounded diet rich in vegetables, fresh fruits, lean proteins, and healthy fats like avocados, nuts, and olives.

Heart Problems

Some patients may develop long-term heart conditions due to chemotherapy. Conditions may include congestive heart failure, heart disease, or hypertension (high blood pressure). Cancer survivors who are at increased risk of long-term heart problems caused by chemotherapy include those who:

- Were aged 65+ at the time of cancer treatment
- Received very high doses of chemo
- Had treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma as a child
- Were given certain medications, including Herceptin, Ogivri, Adriamycin, or Doxil

Symptoms of heart disease include shortness of breath, dizziness, swollen hands or feet, arrhythmia, chest pain, or lightheadedness. These symptoms should never go ignored, especially if you're a survivor with any of the risk factors for chemo-induced heart problems. If you fall into this category, and experience any of these symptoms, schedule an appointment with a cardiologist right away. It's also a good idea to talk to your doctor about having an echocardiogram or another test to check for heart damage. Echocardiograms and similar tests can show immediate problems, such as heart attack. They're also useful for tracking changes to the heart over time. Your increased risk for heart problems should be brought to the attention of all doctors you see. Having this information will help them avoid prescribing medications that could make heart problems worse.

Leukemia

Chemotherapy may damage bone marrow stem cells, which can increase your risk of developing blood cancers like leukemia or myelodysplasia. Fortunately, leukemia as a side effect of chemotherapy is rare. Particular chemo drugs that have been linked to leukemia include cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, and epirubicin. If your cancer treatment regimen included those drugs, be aware of the symptoms of leukemia, such as swollen lymph nodes, bone pain, night sweats, weakness, fatigue, and rapid weight loss. Talk with your oncologist if you experience any of these symptoms.

While you can expect to experience at least some of these long-term side effects of chemo, you shouldn't have to have trouble managing them. If you do, make sure to talk to a member of your Minnesota Oncology cancer care team. You should also let your cancer team know if you experience any unusual symptoms not mentioned here as they could also be related to the chemo you received during treatment.



Managing Dental Health after Cancer Treatment

When cancer enters the body, it is there to fight. Not only is it a well-armed and very prepared opponent, it's not likely to give up easily, even when treatment comes at it relentlessly.

The ultimate goal of cancer treatment is to slow the growth of, kill, and prevent new cancer cells from growing. In order to do this effectively, the medicine used must be very potent. Unfortunately, this means that life after cancer often comes with various short- and long-term side effects— one of which includes dental complications.

The following information is intended to be your guide so you can learn more about dental problems caused by cancer treatments— which treatments are most likely to be the culprit, why they cause oral health issues in the first place, the most common dental issues experienced by cancer survivors, and tips that will help you manage and prevent them.

Cancer Treatments That Cause Dental Complications

While all types of cancer treatments come with their own list of side effects, dental problems are most likely to arise due to chemotherapy and radiation.

Oral health issues can arise both during and after treatment. Both chemo and radiation are designed to kill, slow, and stop the growth of fast-growing cancer cells. The downside is that neither treatment method



is capable of differentiating between cancerous cells and the healthy cells. This means that your healthy, fast-growing cells can also be affected by your cancer treatment.

The cells in the lining of your mouth happen to be normal, fast-growing cells, which can be damaged by both radiation and chemotherapy. Because of this, the tissues in the mouth are unable to repair themselves because they have lost the ability to regenerate new cells. Other dental issues that can arise due to radiation therapy include the breaking down of oral tissues, salivary glands, and even bone.

It is important to note that dental issues resulting from chemotherapy tend to be shorter in duration than those resulting from radiation. It is also imperative to understand that radiation around the head and neck makes cancer survivors more prone to dental problems due to its close proximity to the mouth.

Preventing and Managing Dental Complications

While there is no guaranteed way to prevent the occurrence of dental problems due to cancer treatment, there are measures you can take to minimize and manage oral health issues. Dental health should be managed [before, during, and after treatment for the desired results](#) and to reduce complications.



Before Cancer Treatment

The more proactive you are, the better. Prior to beginning cancer treatment, try to visit your dentist for a thorough dental and mouth check-up. Any issues found should be addressed before your cancer treatment begins. If you are diagnosed with a chronic issue, work with both your oncologist and dentist to create a plan for management during treatment.

The benefits of preventive oral care should not be ignored. In addition to increasing the likelihood that your cancer treatment plan is successful, it also [reduces the chances of oral health issues](#) causing very serious health issues later on.

During Cancer Treatment

Communicate regularly with your oncologist and dentist so they can carefully monitor the health of your mouth and immediately treat any issues that arise. The sooner oral health issues are caught, the more likely they'll be able to work towards reducing discomfort and potential complications.

Treating dental problems in a timely fashion may also increase the effectiveness of cancer treatment. Allowing dental problems to persist during treatment, means your body is working overtime, trying to fight not one but two enemies.

Here are some tips to help ease the symptoms of dental issues during cancer treatment.

Mouth Sores

Mouth sores are a common side effect of certain types of chemo and radiation. The symptoms can be eased by:

- Using a gentle toothbrush and toothpaste
- Drinking liquids with a straw
- Thoroughly cleaning dentures

- Keeping lips hydrated with the use of a soothing lip balm
- Eating cold foods or foods that are soft and bland
- Asking your oncologist about prescription medication to relieve the pain

Bleeding of the Mouth

Just as the name implies, bleeding of the mouth involves extremely painful sores or ulcers in the mouth that can lead to bleeding, an infection, not eating, inability to drink water, and refusal to take medications. Symptoms include red or swollen gums, blood in the mouth, bruises, increased mucus, white patches, and pink dots in the mouth. Consider these tips to ease the symptoms:

- Use a soft-bristled toothbrush and a mild toothpaste
- Rinse your mouth with ice water every two hours and hold ice chips in your mouth
- Keep your lips hydrated with a mild lip balm
- Eat soft foods that will not irritate your gums

Dry Mouth and Thickening Saliva

Radiation, chemo, medications, and dehydration can all be causes of dry mouth or thickening saliva. When your salivary glands become irritated they produce either less saliva, thicker saliva, or both.

The severity of the condition varies among patients. Difficulty swallowing food, thickened saliva, food residue left in the mouth, and cracked lips and gums are some symptoms that may be experienced. This can lead to cavities and infections. Here's what you can do:

- Suck on ice chips
- Drink fluids with meals, chew slowly and take small bites



- Use lip balm to moisturize lips
- Rinse out mouth often with artificial saliva or doctor-approved solution
- Chew sugarless gum

After Cancer Treatment

It's important to understand that the dental issues experienced vary among patients. Some survivors may experience minimal to no mouth issues at all while others experience severe and late-onset side effects.

Remain proactive even after treatment ends, especially since dental problems can present themselves down the road. Make sure that you are caring for your teeth properly, brushing and flossing as recommended by your dentist. Any issues you notice with your gums, teeth, or mouth should be brought to the attention of the dentist as soon as possible so the issue can be resolved.

In addition to the most common dental problems that can occur during treatment, other oral issues that may be experienced by cancer survivors include tooth decay, gum disease, and changes in taste after cancer treatment.

Tooth Decay and Gum Disease

Tooth decay is a dental condition in which the enamel of your tooth is destroyed to the point where tiny holes (cavities) develop in your teeth. Gum disease is a condition in which the tissues that hold your teeth in place are affected. In order to prevent tooth decay and gum disease from affecting your teeth and gums any further, it is important to speak with your dentist as soon as possible. He or she can also come up with a solution to restore your mouth's health.

Changes in Taste

A patient can experience changes in taste months after the end of chemotherapy. This side effect is a result

of nausea, vomiting, and damage to the oral tissues. To help manage the changes in taste after cancer treatment, consider maintaining good oral hygiene, eating small meals more frequently, marinating meats, and flavoring foods with bold seasonings and spices.

The bottom line is that understanding how your oral health may be affected by cancer treatment and taking the proper steps to manage it will lead to an improved quality of life.

If you have any questions or concerns about dental issues before, during, or after your cancer treatments, we encourage you to consult with your dentist as well as someone from your Minnesota Oncology cancer care team.

Cancer Survivorship & Mental Health





Mental Health as a Cancer Survivor

Cancer affects patients on more than just a physical level. It can also impact a patient on a mental level, causing emotional distress, anxiety, and depression—both during treatment and after. During treatment, your concerns probably revolved around your treatment plan, the side effects that could come along with it, and of course, how it was impacting the people you care about. But as a cancer survivor, it's likely those concerns have changed.

Sure, you can breathe easier now that you've beaten cancer—but that doesn't mean you'll be totally concern-free. In fact, feelings of anxiety and stress can sometimes be worse after treatment ends. With less focus on your physical health, you have more time to focus on your new normal—and oftentimes, this leads to another wave of emotions including worry, sadness, and fear. Is there something you can do to regain a more positive and less anxious mental state?

Common Concerns and Feelings After Cancer Treatment

Struggling with several challenges at once is common for cancer survivors. Challenges such as:

- Not being as socially active as you once were. Gathering in groups of people can sometimes leave you vulnerable to conversations about your health that you aren't quite ready to have.
- Post-cancer body image. Surgery, weight gain, and weight loss could leave your body looking different than it was before cancer.

- The inability to remember things. This lingering side effect, called “chemobrain,” can be frightening to those who experience it.
- Worrying that the cancer will come back, and if it does, where might it reappear?
- Being worried about your financial situation, whether it’s related to medical bills or going back to work.
- Feeling alone after treatment. During your cancer treatment, you may have been surrounded by helpers— doctors, nurses, friends, and family who drove you places, ran errands for you, cooked for you, and helped you maintain your home. Doing things on your own again can leave you feeling overwhelmed and even depressed that the support system you had during treatment isn’t there for you as frequently as before.

Surviving cancer is certainly a relief. But feeling truly happy again can take some time—and that’s OK. These negative feelings and emotions you may be feeling after cancer are common and completely normal.

Tips for Improving Your Mental Health After Cancer Treatment

It might seem challenging at first, but your mental health can be improved once cancer treatment is over. Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Accept that your feelings are normal and that it’s OK to have them.
2. Reach out to your closest family members and/or friends telling them about your feelings and concerns. There’s no reason you should move forward on your own and the people closest to you can often help you feel better.
3. Talk with your general practitioner or cancer care team at your next appointment, letting them know how you’ve been feeling. If they think medicine might help, they can write a prescription.
4. Choose 1 or 2 things at a time that you can start to work on to relieve some of the stress. These should be issues you have control over such as your work situation, or getting back to a healthy weight.
5. Consider talking to other survivors. Support groups are available as well as other support services for patients and survivors including medication or yoga classes, art therapy, journaling, and more.

Visit Minnesota Oncology’s [Patient Resources and Education](#) page to find a support program.



Making Sense of Cancer Recurrence and How to Manage the Fear of It

A pivotal moment for cancer survivors is hearing their oncologist tell them that they're cancer free. In fact, you yourself may have rung the bell on your last treatment as a celebration! While this is certainly good news, there's no guarantee you'll be cancer free forever. Therefore, it only makes sense that you may feel anxious amidst the excitement.

A Cancer Survivor's Big Question: What if It Comes Back?

According to a research paper published in the *Oncology Journal*, “fear of cancer recurrence is prevalent, distressing, and long-lasting, and can negatively impact patients’ quality of life, use of health services, and adherence to follow-up.” In other words, cancer recurrence is a genuine fear among cancer survivors. The study continues by saying that lack of help could lead to ongoing fear— even in cancer survivors who have low risk of the cancer coming back.



Practical Tips for Managing Fear of Cancer Recurrence

Of course, turning off those anxious thoughts is often easier said than done. The good news, however, is that there are some practical strategies for managing fear of cancer recurrence— many of which resemble strategies for managing other common fears, such as: What if I lose my job? What if I'm the victim of a random crime? What if an intruder breaks in while I'm sleeping? And so on.

As with these other situations, there are two primary ways you can try to manage that fear. The first, is to do whatever you can to reduce the likelihood that your fear will become reality. And the second, is to train your brain not to obsess over uncertainties that are out of your control.

In regards to cancer, being diligent about regular post-cancer checkups and screenings is a great way to take control of your fear of recurrence. Additionally, you should follow your oncologist's instructions about diet, exercise, medication, etc. According to an American Cancer Society report on cancer treatment and survivorship:

- Maintaining an exercise regimen after treatment reduces the risks of cancer recurrence and increases overall survival rates
- Being overweight or obese after treatment can reduce your chance of long-term survival
- Tobacco use after cancer treatment increases the risk of cancer recurrence

The more you strive to prevent recurrence, the easier it will become to relax a little bit.

Oftentimes, letting go of what's out of your control is much harder to do. If you find yourself struggling with this, consider talking with someone about it— someone like a therapist, a cancer survivor support

group member, a clergy person, or your oncologist. Sometimes, all it takes is a safe place to talk to help you cope with fear of cancer recurrence. Eventually, your focus will shift, making it easier to move forward with your life.

It's important to understand that even the best of intentions doesn't guarantee that the cancer won't recur. But that doesn't mean to lose hope! Work toward directing your thoughts elsewhere, keeping in mind that living in fear of recurrence means you're robbing yourself of precious cancer-free moments you can and should be enjoying!

Again, don't struggle with this worry alone. Talk with someone who can help. For many survivors, discussing their concerns and fears with others, especially other cancer survivors can be helpful.



Social and Emotional Changes for Cancer Survivors



The reasons to despise cancer are plenty— yet one that's not discussed as often is how socially and emotionally drained you can still feel after you beat the disease physically. Cancer is a lifelong journey that does not end when you become a survivor. It's something that changes you both mentally and emotionally. Unfortunately, ignoring these changes rather than addressing them head on, may hold you back from enjoying life. The good news is that by acknowledging them and taking steps to sort through them can help you cope better while becoming a stronger and more compassionate person.

The Residual Social and Emotional Fallout of Cancer

Whether on a small scale or a large one, it's safe to say that every cancer survivor has experienced a whirlwind of emotions that include shock, disbelief, fear, and anger. For some people, the physical and emotional symptoms of cancer improve simultaneously. However, for many others, beating the disease physically is just one step in a long journey toward recovery because oftentimes, emotional wounds take much longer to heal than physical ones.



Emotional Symptoms for Survivors is Normal

Emotions like anxiety, fear, depression, and social withdrawal can affect us all, but cancer survivors are even more vulnerable. According to an article published in Cancer Today magazine, nine in 100 people experience depression, but among cancer survivors, that rate is tripled to 27 in 100 experiencing depression. Commonly, cancer survivors:

- Worry that their cancer will recur
- Mourn the loss of their pre-cancer life, attitude, and outlook
- Feel guilt about beating cancer when others did not
- Struggle with body image issues and, consequently, become withdrawn socially and intimately

Signs That It May Be Time to Seek Help

It can be hard to know when to get help, but there are some symptoms that indicate it's time:

- Avoiding friends, family members, and other people or places out of fear
- Unexplained crying
- Sadness or hopelessness
- Feeling afraid or nervous much of the time
- Disinterest in activities you used to enjoy
- Trouble sleeping
- The need for constant reassurance from others
- Feel guilty or like you're a burden to others

It's important to remember that you didn't battle the physical disease of cancer alone, which means you don't have to battle the emotional ups and downs alone. Participating in cancer survivors' support groups and/or talking to a psychotherapist can help you get your feelings out in the



open which, in itself, can be incredibly helpful! Minnesota Oncology offers a survivorship program that you can learn more about from your cancer care team.

If you're struggling with emotional problems, talking to a therapist and to other survivors is important; so is having a primary care physician. A Cancer Today article noted that 8% of survivors with depression reported they did not have a primary care physician, compared to just 4% of survivors who were not dealing with depression.

If you have a primary care physician, he or she is trained to identify the symptoms of depression and help patients receive help. They can also determine if you could benefit from anti-anxiety or antidepressant medications.

Remember, your joy and quality of life is worth holding on to! Any social or emotional changes you are experiencing are completely normal because they are actually lingering symptoms of the monumental physical battle you fought and won. You needed plenty of help to overcome your physical cancer struggles. Don't hesitate to enlist help overcoming your emotional cancer struggles too!





Coping with Body Changes After Cancer Treatment

While making it through cancer treatment is a wonderful thing, some survivors will continue to experience lasting effects on the body. Both men and women may experience physical changes that can affect their self-esteem. Because of this, it's important to learn what you can do to make coping with these physical changes a little easier.

Cancer Can Have a Long-Term Impact on Your Body

The cancer treatment(s) you had may have had a very visible impact on your body. Some of these changes are permanent, while others, although not permanent, may be evident for months or even years. With all of these changes, it's understandable that your self-esteem and confidence might be impacted to the point of having to adjust and accept what's new for your post-treatment body.

There are some fairly common physical changes, both permanent and long-term, that survivors must learn to cope with. These include:

- Changes in the texture and color of hair
- Scars that are a result of surgeries that removed a limb, breast, or other part of the body
- Ostomy (an opening created in the body so wastes can be collected in a bag)
- Atrophy, which is reduced muscle tone as a result of inactivity



Medications can also impact physical changes including:

- Changes to skin tone
- Weight loss from medications or loss of appetite
- Weight gain from medications or restrictions limiting physical activity

Eating a healthy diet that includes good fats, lean proteins, and vegetables may help you avoid these becoming long-lasting issues. Increasing your level of physical activity to build muscle could also help.

Coping with Body Changes

Unless you've experienced cancer and the physical changes it causes, it can be hard to truly understand a survivor's struggle with body image. Those who have not walked in your shoes may find it easy to think that you should be grateful you survived your illness and that you shouldn't worry about how your body looks. The truth is, if you cared about your appearance before getting cancer, it's likely that you'll still care about it after going through cancer.

It's no secret that having cancer is a life-changing experience— an experience that often gives survivors a new perspective on what is and is not important in life. By learning how to focus on the positive aspects about your body (not the least of which is that it is free from cancer), you'll probably spend less time mourning physical changes you're not happy about. The following advice might help you during the times you are feeling self-conscious about aspects of your appearance:

- Remember that just because your body looks different on the outside, you are the same person on the inside. People who loved you before cancer will continue to love you and your post-cancer body!
- Go easy on yourself. It's okay to grieve your pre-cancer body! Doing so will help you eventually move past those normal feelings and begin to get used to your new body.
- When you are ready, consider researching possible reconstructive surgery, cosmetic solutions, and/or prosthetics that may be able to help you look more like your pre-cancer self.
- Talk with other survivors. Above anyone else, they'll be more likely to understand what you're going through. In addition to validating your feelings, their experience and suggestions can help you find ways to cope.
- Understand that curiosity is natural and be prepared for questions about your appearance. The people closest to you (and some not so close) may ask



questions. Decide how you'll respond if people want to talk about changes to your appearance (if you don't want to talk about these changes, simply tell them you're not ready to talk about it at this time).

- While time does not heal all wounds, it can soften them. Some physical changes, such as hair loss, weight gain, or weight loss may go away eventually. Other changes like scars may become less noticeable over time.
- Focus on the positive. There are still things you can do to feel attractive! Depending on your unique physical situation, you can still get a manicure or pedicure; experiment with a beard, mustache, or goatee; buy some new clothes to accommodate changes to your body; have a makeover; try out new hairstyles, wigs, toupees, and/or hats; upgrade your eyeglasses; wear fun jewelry; etc., to draw attention to what you do love about your appearance.

Be sure to talk with your cancer care team and/or seek help from a professional counselor if you continue to struggle with body issues. You may also want to consider talking with one of [our social workers here at Minnesota Oncology](#). They are here to help guide you through life after cancer, including coping with your new body. Learn about our telehealth option for social work appointments, [Caring Face-2-Face](#).



Support After Cancer





Getting Support After Cancer

You've officially reached cancer survivor status. No more frequent visits to the cancer center for treatment or check-ins with your cancer care team. While this is certainly good news, it can still be a little unnerving now that you're "on your own." You might even be wondering, "What comes next?"

It's understandable that you may have mixed emotions ranging from excited and grateful to anxious or scared. Considering that every survivor and their circumstances are different, that's completely normal! Transitioning back to a "normal" life doesn't happen overnight and sometimes requires a little help. In most cases, your cancer care team will spend time helping you with the next steps. Whether you have professional help or not, here are some steps to take after cancer treatment is over.

Get a Follow-Up Care Plan

Once your cancer treatment comes to an end, you won't see your cancer team as much. However, you'll still need to see them for follow-up care. Together, you and your cancer team will work to set and understand milestones and follow-up appointments that need to happen after your treatments are complete. With their guidance, you can also get familiar with what to expect, including how to alleviate the fear of recurrence, which is a common source of anxiety for survivors.

Get Organized

With less need for your cancer care team, you'll once again rely more often on doctors outside of oncology for your routine medical needs. Be sure to inform all of your doctors about the type of cancer you had and how your cancer was treated. This will give them a better idea of what to watch for since cancer treatments can cause side effects that show up months or years after treatment ends. Make sure you have detailed copies of your personal health records you can share with your doctors.

Get Emotional Support

It's likely you had a lot of support as a patient. The good news is that it doesn't end now that you're a survivor. No one understands how you're feeling like other survivors who have walked a similar path. Minnesota Oncology's [Survivorship Program](#), as well as survivor support groups, are safe spaces to discuss struggles, worries, and emotions that are common after treatment ends.

Remember, any major life change can be a bit scary and it's normal that you may fear this transition from cancer patient to cancer survivor. Keep in mind that we at Minnesota Oncology are here for you, striving to help you get all you need to transition into your new cancer survivor role.



Follow-Up Care for Cancer Survivors



Your cancer diagnosis started you down a new journey— one that extends well past the cancer treatment phase. It's a journey that involves caring for yourself in a whole new way now, and in the future.

At the beginning of your cancer survivor journey, you had to determine what your new normal would look like and share that with your loved ones. In the middle of the journey, focus was on cancer treatment and the physical and emotional side effects of it.

Now that treatment is behind you, you're able to look forward to the rest of your life. You might even feel up to adding more enjoyable activities into your schedule now that less time is devoted to doctor appointments. It's that feeling of being ready to "move on."

While moving on is a good thing, it's incredibly important that you tend to your health – both your follow-up care as a cancer patient as well as remembering to tend to regular health screenings and caring for other health conditions.

Step 1: Have a Cancer Survivorship Plan

All survivors receive a follow-up cancer plan from their care team that includes information regarding treatment history, care team, suggestions for diet and exercise, and late and long-term side effects as a result of their cancer treatment. According to the National Cancer Institute, this plan should be fairly detailed and answer questions such as:

- When will I begin to feel more like myself?
- Are there specific doctors I should see for my follow-up care?
- How often should I see my doctor(s) for follow-up care?
- Are there certain symptoms I should watch for or be concerned about?
- What long-term health issues could I expect after my cancer treatment?
- What records should I keep about my treatment?
- What steps can I take to remain as healthy as possible?

If your cancer follow-up plan doesn't address these or other questions that you may have, take time to talk with your cancer care team.

Step 2: Be Diligent Regarding Cancer Follow-up Appointments

Each cancer patient is unique, which means follow-up instructions will vary. Typically, how often you have follow-up appointments will depend on various factors including the type of cancer you had, how it was treated, and your overall health. On average, most cancer survivors are instructed to see their oncologist for follow-up appointments every 3 to 4 months for the first 2 to 3 years after treatment, and then once or twice a year. Since cancer recurrence is always a possibility, it is extremely important to make and keep your follow-up appointments. The earlier a recurrence is caught, the greater the chance of treating it quickly and more effectively.

About Cancer Recurrence

There is no guarantee that a recurrence won't happen. Nor is there a foolproof way to prevent it from happening. There are, however, certain actions you can take to be as healthy as possible, such as these that are recommended by the American Cancer Society:

- Aim to eat at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits each day
- Reduce the amount of red (beef, pork, lamb) and processed meats (hot dogs, sausage, lunch meats, etc.) you eat
- Consume foods made with whole grains rather than refined grains and sugars



- Get regular exercise
- Return to normal daily activities as soon after cancer treatment as possible
- Try to work up to exercising for at least 150 minutes per week
- Do strength training exercises at least twice per week
- Take off weight if you are overweight or obese
- Limit alcohol consumption to one (women) or two (men) drinks per day

Also, take note if you notice signs of cancer recurrence, such as:

- Original cancer symptoms return
- New or unusual pain that lingers
- Persistent cough
- Frequent headaches
- Chills or fever
- Unexplained weight loss
- Difficulty breathing
- Easy bleeding or bruising
- New skin lesions or changes such as an abnormal rash, etc.
- Blood in your stool or urine
- Lumps, bumps, or swelling that can't be explained
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, appetite loss, or trouble swallowing
- Any unusual symptoms that concern you

Step 3: Get Support from Other Cancer Survivors

As a cancer survivor, it's only natural that you may experience more anxiety about your health than people who have never experienced something similar.



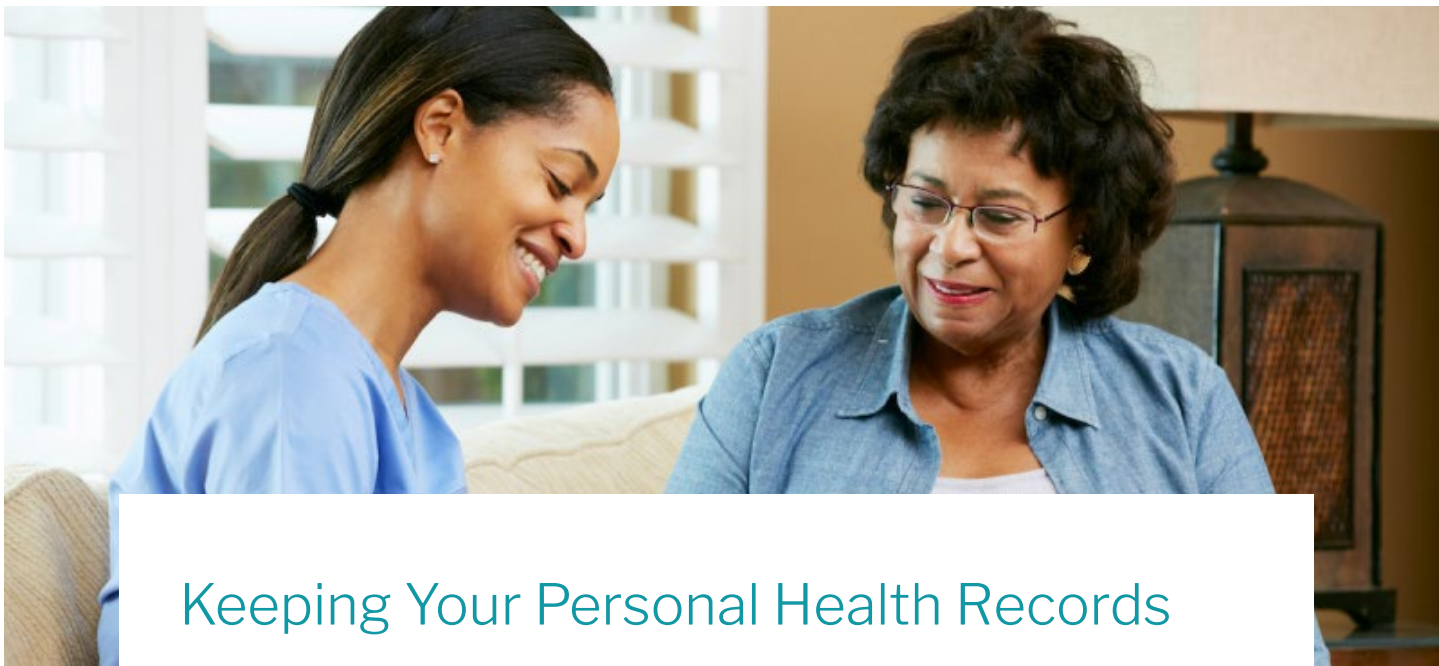
There are a couple of ways you can help relieve some of those worries. One is to remain diligent in attending your follow-up oncology appointments. Another is to look for support from others who understand what you're going through. A support group for survivors is a great way to get that connection.

By surrounding yourself with other cancer survivors, you can open up about your fears and anxieties to others who are familiar with your struggles. Realizing you are not alone and gaining strength from fellow survivors will help you transition to life after cancer.

Minnesota Oncology hosts survivors' support groups and events year-round.

[Click here to learn more about them.](#)





Keeping Your Personal Health Records

When you were going through cancer treatment, frequent visits to your doctor became a big part of your routine. Now that you're now cancer-free, it's likely you'll still need to visit your doctor more frequently than other people who have never experienced a serious illness. And with these visits comes paperwork — some of which you might be wondering about. Let's take a closer look at the documents that comprise your personal health records, including what you need to keep, why, and for how long.

Cancer Treatment Survivor Summary: A Cancer Survivor's Most Important Health Record

A treatment summary is a document your oncologist completed during or soon after your cancer treatment ended. This document should list your exact cancer diagnosis and when you received it, what stage your cancer was, and any other relevant information that came from your pathology report. Additionally, it describes all of the cancer treatment(s) you received.

Essentially, this document should reflect any pertinent information that could affect your health in the future.

Your cancer treatment summary is highly important!

It should be shared with all doctors you see in the future, especially since most won't know your medical history. The treatment summary, however, ensures that you have easy access to your pertinent medical records when you need them.

You may notice the sheet includes a lot of medical terms that can be hard to understand, but that's OK. What really matters is that it will provide great insight for any future physician who may need to provide care for cancer or for another condition.

Other Important Medical Records to Keep

There are other important medical records to hold onto, which include:

- Treatment plans for existing health conditions
- Immunization records
- Records detailing other past major illnesses
- Hospital bills
- Results from imaging tests
- Records of past appointments, including the date and the doctor's name
- Current medications and medication histories (including information about allergies or adverse reactions to medications)

Depending on your location, your physician may only be required to keep your records for a limited period of time. And even if your physician still does have your records, you might face challenges such as having to pay a significant fee to retrieve them.

Keeping Track of Your Health Records

These days, most healthcare providers keep electronic medical records (EMRs) on each of their patients. With that said, there is no guarantee that this method of record keeping is always reliable. This is why it's wise to keep track of your own records, too, rather than rely on your providers to do so.

Keeping track of your records may be easier than you realize, especially if you're comfortable with tracking them digitally. Many apps are available to help you organize your medical records using your smartphone, personal computer, or tablet. This [article](#) mentions 10 apps you can look into for starters. The technology definitely exists. Why not use it?

Of course, it's always a good idea to have paper copies as a backup. If you haven't already, request paper copies of all your important health records (especially records related to your cancer treatment). Be sure to store them safely and conveniently so you can have them ready for each time you meet with a new medical provider.



Oncology Social Workers: Guiding Patients Through Survivorship

As a cancer survivor, you are well aware of the challenges that come with a diagnosis. There's learning how to navigate the healthcare system, figuring out which doctors you should see, and researching what your insurance coverage includes, to name a few. While these specific challenges might not exist anymore, you know there are still challenges— they just look different. Now, it's whether you should go back to work. If you do, what information will you be willing to share with your coworkers? Perhaps you're dealing with body changes, wondering how to adapt to, and accept, the new you. And if that's not enough, there's learning how to create a new normal that you're happy with.

Cancer survivors grapple with different challenges, many of which can be too much for one person or even one family to manage on their own. Fortunately, oncology social workers are well-equipped to help cancer patients transition to cancer survivors after treatment ends.

What is an Oncology Social Worker?

Oncology social workers are healthcare professionals trained to counsel you about ways to cope with the

emotional and physical issues related to your cancer. This could include providing you with helpful resources, explaining your diagnosis in more detail, figuring out your medical and insurance coverage, and teaching you how to talk to your family, especially children, about cancer.

Oncology social workers also help you transition from patient to survivor. They do this in many various ways— providing you support as you re-enter the workforce, helping you cope with long-term side effects of cancer treatment, and guiding you through new, and sometimes uncomfortable, feelings and emotions.

The role of these [patient and family advocates](#) is an essential part of providing patients with high-quality cancer care.

[Read more about the social work team at Minnesota Oncology and the social services they can help you with.](#)

What Survivors Should Know About Oncology Social Workers

It's important to understand that oncology social workers are available to you even after treatment is



over. And, in most cases, they are a free service through your cancer treatment center or community-based cancer organizations.

You, the survivor, sets the pace. For instance, you might only need to meet with an oncology social worker once or twice for help on a specific issue, such as sorting out an insurance claim. On the other hand, you might need to meet more frequently in order to discuss challenges you're facing, like coming to terms with changes to your body or your marriage.

Each survivor's situation is different. While some have a caring support group of family members and friends to depend on, others don't. Regardless of what your situation is, support is available. All you have to do is ask for it! Oncology social workers are standing by to help you. Even if your support system runs deep, there are times when an outside source can be beneficial, especially if there are certain issues that you'd like to remain private. Why not reach out and take advantage of this amazing resource?

[Minnesota Oncology has a team of oncology social workers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area including the surrounding communities: Burnsville, Chaska, Coon Rapids, Fridley, Maplewood, Plymouth, Maplewood, Waconia, and Woodbury](#) that helps cancer survivors with a variety of resources, such as cancer survivor support groups and classes.



Helping Others





How You Can Help Others as a Cancer Survivor

Think back to how you felt after hearing the words, “you have cancer.” Most likely, you felt a range of emotions including shock, disbelief, and fear. And, although you may have had friends and family on standby ready to help, you still might have felt alone. Even though they had good intentions, it was probably difficult for those closest to you to understand how you were feeling unless they too, had experienced cancer. What makes you different is that you’re a survivor— one who is uniquely qualified to help cancer patients.

Volunteering: A Gift to Others And to Yourself

Getting through cancer treatment is hard— and even the most independent people need help. Remember the times you received support during your own cancer journey? That was a selfless gift. Now that your cancer battle is over, you can pay that kindness forward by helping others!

Obviously, the help you give will benefit the recipient. But it’s a benefit for you, too! When you were being treated for cancer, you may have stopped working and/or had to rely on others to lighten the load for you during the times when you couldn’t keep up. As a result, you may have begun to doubt your self-worth and question your abilities. Helping others will help you regain your confidence and understand that you have much to offer!

The Ways Cancer Survivors Can Help Cancer Patients are Many

Regardless of whether you're a "people person" or simply prefer to help out behind the scenes, there are plenty of opportunities you're sure to find suitable. You might consider:

- Working directly with patients and their families to provide aid
- Attending a cancer support group that helps patients
- Participating in some of the online resources, such as Facebook groups or support programs, which are helpful for those who aren't able to get out
- Volunteering your time and talents at one of the many nonprofit organizations that exist to raise money for cancer research or patient care

As a cancer survivor, you have so much to offer. By giving some of your time, you will be making a big impact in the lives of others. Learn more about getting involved by visiting [the American Cancer Society website](#).



Making A Difference to Another Cancer Patient



As a cancer survivor, you are uniquely equipped to help cancer patients because you have literally “walked a mile in their shoes.” You’ve reached the end of a difficult path that others are just beginning, you’ve experienced ups and downs, and it’s likely that you’ve gleaned some wisdom along the way. It’s safe to say that you are living proof that an active life can exist after cancer.

Now that cancer treatment has ended, you might be wondering, “Now what?” During your cancer treatment, you may have experienced help from a cancer survivor—help that you now wish to pay forward to someone else. Here’s your perfect chance to invest a little bit of time volunteering so you can make a difference in the life of patients undergoing cancer treatment.

Ways Cancer Survivors Can Help Patients

The good news is that there are several things you can do to brighten the lives of people being treated for cancer. Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, there are many volunteer opportunities that allow you to work both directly and indirectly with cancer patients. To work one-on-one with cancer patients, consider volunteering for one of the many programs or support groups that allow you to do so. Or, if you prefer a behind-the-scenes or administrative role, those opportunities are available, too. Whichever method of volunteering

suits you best, the first step is to decide how much time you’re able to devote and then start looking for a volunteer position to fill.

If working directly with cancer patients suits you best, depending on where you live, you may find programs that give you the opportunity to:

- Drive patients to and from their doctor appointments.
- Help cancer patients at home by doing their grocery shopping, taking them meals, or taking care of their pets.
- Talk with patients being treated for the cancer you experienced so they can better understand what to expect. Every patient’s experience is different, but hearing about your personal treatment journey will provide valuable insight.
- Take notes for a patient during their doctor appointments.
- Visit patients who have had surgery while they’re recuperating in the hospital.
- Lead, co-lead, or be an active participant in a cancer support group.



- Volunteer your expertise to benefit cancer patients. Are you a cosmetologist? Masseuse? Home improvement contractor? Financial planner? Certain skills you have could help patients feel better physically or address things they aren't able to due to cancer.

If you prefer to have a more indirect role, consider:

- Teaming up with a local organization (or starting your own group) to create and distribute care packages to patients undergoing cancer treatment.
- Donating money to a cancer charity or launching your own fundraising drive.
- Volunteering at a cancer-information hotline.
- Volunteering to help with administrative tasks at a local cancer charity.

Finding an Opportunity to Volunteer

If helping cancer patients is something you're interested in doing, there are several ways to get started. One way is to reach out and offer assistance to anyone you know who is being treated for cancer. Because people can sometimes be reluctant to accept help even when they desperately want to, it's important to be specific and proactive. Instead of saying, "Please call me if I can help in any way!" say, "If it's OK with you, I will stop by around noon on Monday to mow your yard (or pick up your shopping list, walk your dog, etc.)."

Volunteering benefits both you and the patient. Not only does the time you invest help ease cancer patients' physical and emotional burdens, it will probably lift your spirits to know you've had a positive impact on someone during a difficult time in their life. Remember, you're a survivor— and your personal experiences make you incredibly qualified to help cancer patients during their time of need.





While you might feel alone as a cancer patient, it's important to remember that you aren't. In fact, there are many resources available designed to provide you with strength and support. Survivor matching programs are one such resource.

Survivor matching programs differ from cancer support groups in that they match cancer patients with a survivor of the same type of cancer rather than providing a setting where cancer patients of all types of cancers can gather. Support groups can be a fantastic resource as well, but being matched with a survivor can give you a different kind of support that includes a more personal relationship as you go through cancer treatment.

How to Become a Volunteer

Being able to connect with others who have gone through similar situations can be very helpful for cancer patients. If you are a survivor looking to provide support to someone touched by cancer, consider contacting one of the programs listed above so you can volunteer your time. Not only is volunteering rewarding for you, it's rewarding for those who need to build quality relationships with people who can provide them with the support they need.

