After Cervical Cancer Treatment

Get information about life as a cancer survivor, next steps, and what you can do to help.

Living as a Cancer Survivor

For many people, cancer treatment often raises questions about next steps as a survivor.

- Living as a Cervical Cancer Survivor

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- Follow-up care
- Ask your doctor for a survivorship care plan
- Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records
- Can I lower the risk of my cancer progressing or coming back?
- If the cancer comes back
- Getting emotional support
- Second cancers after treatment

For some women with cervical cancer, treatment may remove or destroy the cancer. Completing treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You'll be relieved to finish treatment, yet it's hard not to worry about the cancer coming back. This is very common if you've had cancer.

For other women, the cancer may never go away completely. These women may get regular treatments with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or other therapies to try to control the cancer for as long as possible. Learning to live with cancer[1] that does not go away can be difficult and very stressful.

Follow-up care

If you have completed treatment, your doctors will still want to watch you closely. It's very important to go to all of your follow-up appointments. Your doctor visits are a good time to ask questions and talk about any changes or problems you notice or concerns you have. During these visits, your doctors will ask if you are having any problems and may order exams and lab tests or imaging tests to look for signs of cancer or treatment side effects[2].

Almost any cancer treatment can have side effects. Some might only last for a few days or weeks, but others might last a long time. Some side effects might not even show up until years after you have finished treatment.

It's important to let your doctor know about any new symptoms or problems, because they could be caused by the cancer coming back[3] or by a new disease or a second cancer.

Doctor visits

In women with no signs of cervical cancer remaining, many doctors recommend follow-up visits (which may include imaging tests and blood tests) with a physical exam every 3 to 6 months for the first couple of years after treatment, then every 6 months or so for the next few years. People who were treated for early-stage cancers may need exams less often. Some doctors may advise different follow-up schedules.

Most doctors recommend that women treated for cervical cancer keep getting regular Pap tests no matter how they were treated (surgery or radiation). Although cells for a Pap test are normally taken from the cervix, if you no longer have a cervix (because you had a trachelectomy or hysterectomy), the cells will be taken from the upper part of the vagina.

Survivors of cervical cancer should also follow the American Cancer Society Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cancer[4], such as those for breast, lung, and colorectal cancer.

Imaging tests

Imaging tests[5] may be done if you have worrisome signs or symptoms of the cancer coming back.

Ask your doctor for a survivorship care plan

Talk with your doctor about developing asurvivorship care plan[6] for you. This plan might include:

- A suggested schedule for follow-up exams and tests[7]
- A schedule for other tests you might need to look for long-term health effects from your cancer or its treatment
- A list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your doctor
- Suggestions for things you can do that might improve your health, including possibly lowering your chances of the cancer coming back

Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records

Even after treatment, it's very important to keep health insurance[8]. Tests and doctor visits cost a lot, and even though no one wants to think of their cancer coming back, this could happen.

At some point after your cancer treatment, you might find yourself seeing a new doctor who doesn't know about your medical history. It's important to keep copies of your medical records[9] to give your new doctor the details of your diagnosis and treatment.

Can I lower the risk of my cancer progressing or coming back?

If you have (or have had) cervical cancer, you probably want to know if there are things you can do that might lower your risk of the cancer growing or coming back, such as exercising, eating a certain type of diet, or taking nutritional supplements. While there are some things you can do that might be helpful, more research is needed to know for sure.

Get regular physical activity

Some studies have shown that women who are more physically active after being diagnosed with cervical cancer might live longer. More research is being done in this

area.

Quit smoking

It is known that smoking is linked to an increased risk of cervical cancer. While it's not clear if smoking can affect cervical cancer growth or recurrence, it is still helpful to stop smoking to decrease your risk of getting another smoking-related cancer. Not smoking can also help you tolerate chemotherapy and radiation better and decrease further damage to the cells of the cervix or cervical area. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor or call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.

Adopt other healthy behaviors

Adopting other healthy behaviors such as eating well and staying at a healthy weight might help, but no one knows for sure. However, we do know that these types of changes can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of cervical cancer or other cancers.

About dietary supplements

So far, no dietary supplements (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of cervical cancer progressing or coming back. This doesn't mean that no supplements will help, but it's important to know that none have been proven to do so.

Dietary supplements are not regulated like medicines in the United States – they do not have to be proven effective (or even safe) before being sold, although there are limits on what they're allowed to claim they can do. If you're thinking about taking any type of nutritional supplement, talk to your health care team. They can help you decide which ones you can use safely while avoiding those that might be harmful.

If the cancer comes back

If cancer does return at some point, your treatment options will depend on where the cancer is, what treatments you've had before, and your health. Surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or some combination of these might be options. Other types of treatment might also be used to help relieve any symptoms from the cancer.

For more on how recurrent cancer is treated, see Treatment Options for Cervical

Cancer, by Stage[10]. For more general information on dealing with a recurrence, you may also want to read Coping With Cancer Recurrence[11].

Getting emotional support

It is normal to feel depressed, anxious, or worried[12] when cervical cancer is a part of your life. Some people are affected more than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support[13] from other people, whether friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others. Learn more in Life After Cancer[14].

Second cancers after treatment

Cancer survivors can be affected by a number of health problems, but often a major concern is facing cancer again. Cancer that comes back after treatment is called a **recurrence**. But some cancer survivors may develop a new, unrelated cancer later. This is called a second cancer.

Unfortunately, being treated for cervical cancer doesn't mean you can't get another cancer. Women who have had cervical cancer can still get the same types of cancers that other women get. In fact, they might be at higher risk for certain types of cancer, including:

- Cancers of the mouth and throat[15]
- Cancer of the larynx (voice box)[16]
- Anal cancer[17]
- Acute myeloid leukemia[18]
- Vulvar cancer[19]
- Vaginal cancer[20]
- Lung cancer[21]
- Cancers of the bladder and ureter[22]
- Stomach cancer[23]
- Colorectal cancer[24]
- Pancreas cancer[25]

Many of these cancers are linked to smoking and/or infection with the human papilloma virus (HPV)[26], which are also strongly linked to cervical cancer.

The increased risks of acute myeloid leukemia (AML) and cancers of the rectum, bladder, and bone[27] seem to be linked to treatment with radiation.

Can I lower my risk of getting a second cancer?

There are steps you can take to lower your risk and stay as healthy as possible. For example, women who have had cervical cancer should do their best to stay away from tobacco products[28]. Smoking might further increase the risk of some of the second cancers that are more common after cervical cancer.

To help maintain good health[29], cervical cancer survivors should also:

- Get to and stay at a healthy weight
- Keep physically active and limit the time you spend sitting or lying down
- Follow a healthy eating pattern that includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limits or avoids red and processed meats, sugary drinks, and highly processed foods
- It's best not to drink alcohol[30]. If you do drink, have no more than 1 drink per day

These steps may also lower the risk of some other health problems.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/cancer-as-a-chronic-illness.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/screening/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/imaging-tests/imaging-radiology-tests-for-cancer.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/survivorship-care-plans.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/understanding-health-insurance.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/be-healthy-after-treatment.html
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cervical-cancer/treating/by-stage.html
11. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-

concerns/recurrence/coping-with-cancer-recurrence.html
12. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes.html
13. www.cancer.org/support-programs-and-services.html
14. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/be-healthy-after-treatment/life-after-cancer.html
15. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html
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27. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/bone-cancer.html
28. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/tobacco.html
29. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/diet-physical-activity.html
30. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/diet-physical-activity/alcohol-use-and-cancer.html

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Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team (https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html)

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