Cancer Survivorship

Virginia Oncology Associates

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Cancer Survivorship

Being a cancer survivor means more than completing cancer treatment. It means that you have come through what can be a long and difficult journey filled with challenges that you have never faced before – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. It also means that you're an inspiration to others, even if you aren't feeling like your "old self." You're living proof that cancer patients can become cancer survivors who live active, full, healthy lives.

While you may feel a little overwhelmed at first, your thoughts may turn towards what you'd like to do with family and friends, your responsibilities, and your future. You may also have questions and concerns about what you can or should be doing as a cancer survivor, and what you should avoid. And, like many survivors, you may have concerns that the cancer will return.

Cancer Survivorship: Understanding the New Normal

Going from cancer patient to cancer survivor is a bit of a learning curve.

During treatment, you had quick access to your cancer treatment providers, allowing you to ask a lot of questions about how you're feeling and what's normal. Once treatment is over, these opportunities are less frequent, which can lead to some anxiety until you get used to what your new "normal" should feel like. Be sure to reach out if you start to feel different or have new side effects, and be sure to go to your scheduled follow-up appointments so they can monitor you and your physical and mental health.

Of course, the number one question on the minds of most every cancer survivor is: will my cancer come back? Because no one can answer that question, obsessing over it isn't healthy. You will need to find ways to focus on other things. Some of the practical concerns that need to be addressed during your transition period from cancer patient to cancer survivor might include:

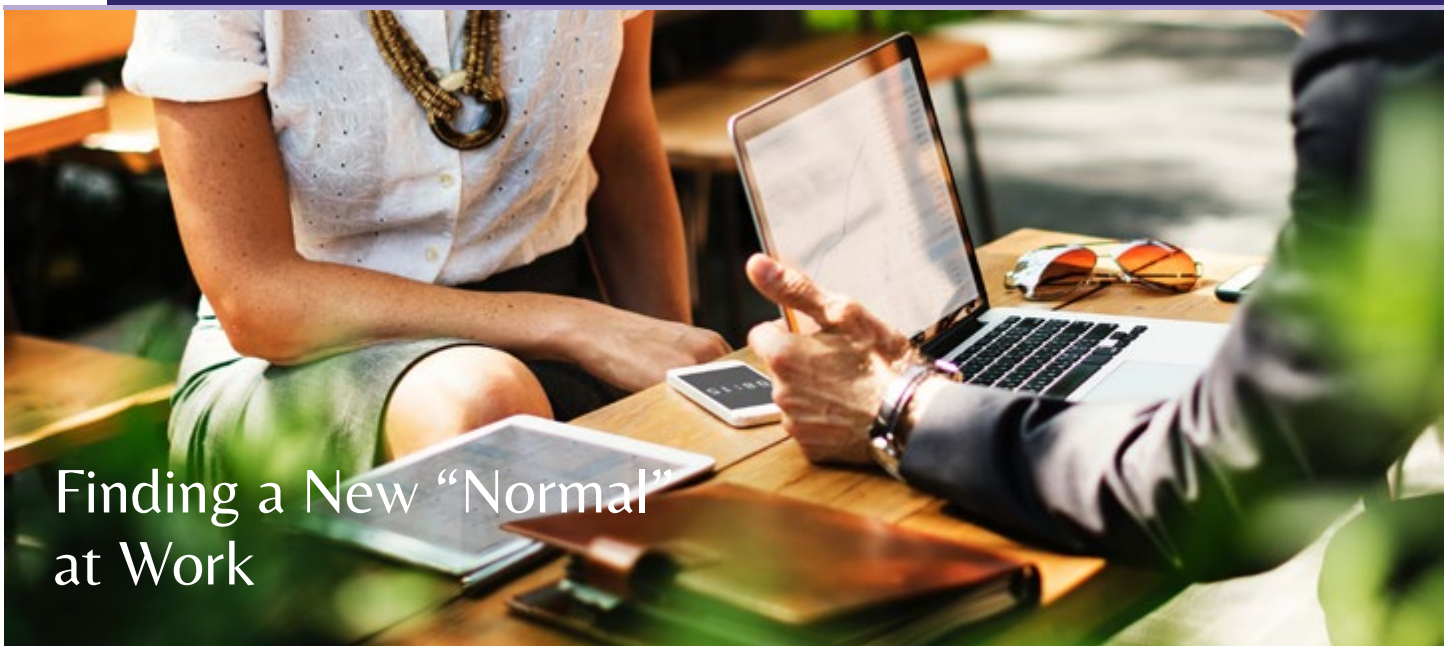
- Will you transition back to the work world? If so, how do you do that?
- How will you deal with friends or co-workers who may not know exactly how to treat you?
- How will you transition back into your pre-cancer roles/ responsibilities within the immediate family?
- What is the best way to manage any post-cancer financial concerns?
- How will you ensure you're making healthy choices regarding nutrition, physical activity, and mental health self-care?
- How will you incorporate exercise into your routine? What kind is safe?
- How will you safeguard against post-cancer depression and anxiety?



Don't Do Survivorship 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.

1. Attend support groups - live or virtual
2. Be a mentor for a cancer patient - programs through the American Cancer Society allow survivors to easily serve in this role.
3. Online resources can be helpful when looking for information about a condition or side effect.
4. Use reliable online resources which may include some of the resources in this guide.
5. Refer to your physician as the primary source of information related to your health.



Finding 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 from your job while you were being treated. Some people want to and are able to keep working throughout their treatment. They may consider work a welcome distraction from dealing with cancer.

Others decide to take a leave of absence from work while they are being treated, or quit their job entirely. Cancer treatment involves regular visits with the oncologist and often leaves patients feeling tired, physically weak, and mentally foggy. For some, taking a break is the best option.

If you stopped working during cancer treatment and are ready to go back to work, now that you're a **cancer survivor**, you may not be sure how to proceed. If you're ready to return to your previous job, how much should you share about what you are, or have been, going through?

More Research is Being Conducted on Long-term Treatment Effects

- Should you tell employers about your cancer diagnosis?
- Should you look for a full-time job or ease back into work with a part-time position?
- Has your cancer journey changed your idea about the type of job you want?
- Have you had experiences during your cancer journey that may make you particularly suited to a certain job?

Whether you are returning to your former job or pursuing a fresh start, don't feel obligated to rush the process. Be gentle with yourself, and don't be afraid to ask others to be patient with you as you find and settle into your new normal.



Returning to Work After Cancer

Transitioning from cancer patient to cancer survivor is a huge relief. This transition is also a time of uncertainty if you're a member of the workforce. Will your employer and/or your coworkers question your ability to perform at your pre-illness level? Will you physically be able to handle your pre-cancer workload? Are you certain you want to return to your old job or should you consider a fresh start at another business?

One way to ease your transition back to the workplace is to prepare ahead of time. Here are some things to think about and address before you schedule your return to work or set out to look for a new job.

Evaluate Your Situation Honestly

Even if you feel mentally ready to return to work because you love your job (or you simply cannot wait to get back to work so you can focus on something besides cancer), are you physically and mentally ready for the challenge?

Your job may not be physically demanding, but the mere responsibility of waking up at a certain time and being alert, responsive, and productive for several hours at a time can be surprisingly tiring. Additionally, most jobs are associated with at least a some degree of stress. Are you prepared to re-enter the world of deadlines, responsibilities, and expectations? As a cancer survivor, your most important "job"

is taking care of yourself. Listen to your body and talk to your doctor and your loved ones. Returning to work can be a tremendously positive milestone – when the time is right. Returning to work before you're physically and mentally ready can have an impact on your health. Don't rush the process – even if you decide now is not the time, you can get there!

Identify Your Ideal Back-to-Work Schedule

Just because you and your physician agree that you're physically and mentally able to return to work, that does not necessarily mean a full-time schedule is right for you. Easing your way back into your daily work routine is often a more successful approach than jumping in with 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." Fighting cancer is exhausting! You may be fully ready to embrace a 40-hour-work week … or, you may be better off returning part-time (working half days or two or three days a week, for instance) or working from home if your job description allows. There is no one-size-fits all approach. Listen to your body and make adjustments. Fatigue from cancer treatment can last for several months for some survivors.

Identify Any Special Accommodations You May Need

When you are a cancer survivor, you might not be able to go back to work under the exact same conditions as before cancer. Sometimes there are physical differences that may require some special accommodations, even if they're temporary. Write down a list of anything you know of or suspect you'll need to request to be successful in the workplace. This might include:

- Do you need to use a wheelchair or walker now?
- Is standing possible for a long period of time? Is a stool an option for you?
- You may be on medication that causes a side effect that your boss should be aware of.
- Will 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.

Schedule a Call or Meeting with Your Boss

Last but definitely not least, before you announce your return to work, have an in-

depth conversation with your boss. 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. Allow them to ask questions so they will understand better how your cancer treatment truly affected your ability to work. And brainstorm solutions with them so that you're a part of the solution to the challenges that 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. Most employers are reasonable and will probably be more than happy to welcome you back after cancer treatment is over. Unfortunately, there are typically some exceptions. Not everyone reacts positively to your request to return to work with some special accommodations.

Hopefully Your Employer Will Be On Your Side Too!

Especially if your cancer treatment regimen caused you to be away from the workplace for an extended period of time, you may worry about how you'll be treated when you return. 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.

Employers' legal requirements to accommodate weakened or disabled employees is more of a gray area than the legal requirements preventing illness-related termination. Federal law requires employers to make a reasonable effort to accommodate qualified job applicants or existing employees who have disabilities. However, if an employer 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), the employer is not required to comply. Reasonable requests that employers must comply with usually include,

- Allowing an employee to be reassigned to a vacant position
- Allowing an employee to work part-time or on a modified schedule
- Restructuring an employee's job so it's more tolerable
- Making changes to make the workplace accessible to those with disabilities

(by installing ramps, enlarging doorways, etc.)

The Law is On Your Side

The most obvious worry that you probably have as a cancer survivor is that you will be 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, as long as you are qualified and able to perform your job, your employer cannot legally terminate or demote you for being ill. If you weren't working before your cancer diagnosis and decide to enter the workplace after your illness, it's also illegal for potential employers to discriminate against you because you have or had cancer.

If you return to the workplace after cancer treatment but still need to take time off for additional treatment or manage your symptoms, your job is protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act. This law allows employees with serious illness to take up to 12 weeks off (all at once or spread out over time) and/or work part-time for a limited time.

In a perfect world, your employer will welcome you back to work with open arms or you'll be successful in landing a new job with an employer that values your contributions and has no problem making small changes to help you thrive in the workplace. Sometimes, those things don't happen. If you'd like 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, it may be time to schedule an appointment with an employment lawyer.



Your Family Life After Cancer

Cancer is a family affair that has affected, and will continue to affect, you and your loved ones even after treatment ends. Cancer leaves behind emotional and physical changes that can be challenging for the entire family.

One common concern of cancer patients' children, grandchildren, and siblings is, "Will I get cancer, too?" Blood relatives of survivors of some cancers, such as breast, colorectal, endometrial, ovarian, pancreatic, and prostate cancers, could be at increased risk of developing them.

Another concern among couples of child-bearing age is, "Will we be able to conceive a child?" Some cancer treatments do affect fertility. If you received any of those treatments, 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, you may experience anxiety when you do try to conceive a child.

Whether you want to conceive a child or not, sex and intimacy concerns will almost certainly cross your mind and that of your partner. You both may wonder, "Is it OK to be sexually active?" Some cancers and cancer treatments do impact sexual function. You may struggle with body image issues and your partner may worry about causing you discomfort.

All of these questions and concerns are normal. Fortunately, with time and open communication, you and your family will find yourselves thinking less about cancer and spending more time enjoying normal life again.

Sexuality and Intimacy After Cancer

When cancer treatment ends and you transition to life as a cancer survivor, there are many things you need to adjust to. This may include resuming a "normal" family life as a cancer survivor, reminding yourself that you can now do things you couldn't do when you were being treated for cancer, and generally accepting the fact that you're no longer "sick." Another issue that most cancer survivors need to face is sexual intimacy. According to one poll conducted by **LIVESTRONG**, nearly 60% of cancer survivors report experiencing sexual dysfunction after treatment. As many as 85% to 90% of survivors of prostate cancer, breast cancer, and gynecologic cancer survivors report long-term concerns regarding physical intimacy.

Common Emotional Concerns Regarding Sex after Cancer

Post-cancer sexual concerns may 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 worried about emotionally pressuring or causing physical pain to his or her partner. A survivor may feel nervous about how his or her partner will respond to changes in their physical appearance, which can be considered a "body image issue." Body image issues after cancer treatment involve your mind (changes in how you feel about your body) and your body (changes in how your body looks.)



Both partners also may worry about having a lowered sex drive and question whether they'll be able to achieve orgasm. And, many couples experience an adjustment period as they transition away from what may have become a patient/caregiver relationship during treatment back to the romantic partner relationship they enjoyed before the cancer diagnosis.

Physical Symptoms of Sexual Dysfunction

Some cancers and their treatments are associated with specific symptoms of sexual dysfunction. The following symptoms do not affect all survivors but are considered relatively common. Many of these symptoms will go away over time.

Breast Cancer

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

Prostate Cancer

- Prostate cancer patients who receive surgery may experience erectile dysfunction (inability to achieve or maintain an erection), difficulty climaxing, dry orgasm, and lowered libido.
- Patients who receive hormone treatments may experience erectile dysfunction, lowered libido, hot flashes, and gynecomastia (growth of breast tissue.)

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

- Gynecologic cancer patients who receive a hysterectomy may experience 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.)
- Patients who receive chemotherapy or radiation may experience low libido, menopausal symptoms, fatigue, increased scarring, bowel and bladder issues.

Colorectal Cancer

- Rectal or Colon cancer patients who receive surgery and/or radiation may experience bowel/bladder changes and complications associated with ostomies/stomas.

Communication is Key

As it was before a cancer diagnosis, the key to a healthy and fulfilling sex life after cancer is communicating with your partner. Sharing your anxieties and fears with your partner is the first step toward restoring a mutually satisfying sex life. Discussing issues is healthy and opens up a channel to resolve issues. Often, couples discover that their biggest fears were all in their head.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to begin a dialogue about intimacy. Individual and/or couples counseling is often very helpful. If you're experiencing anxiety surrounding your sex life, be open and honest with your oncology team or another healthcare provider. They may be able to recommend therapists, and tools and techniques to improve your libido and sexual function.



Strategies for Improving Sexual Desire and Function

Every cancer survivor's physical symptoms, emotions, and relationship is different. There is no one-size-fits-all regimen for improving your sex life after cancer. But the following are suggestions to consider:

- Focus on getting more/better sleep
- Work on improving your self-acceptance and self-confidence (your partner found you attractive before cancer and may find you even more attractive after you have conquered cancer!)
- Work on relaxing
- Exercise (talk to your doctor about what's appropriate)
- Talk to your doctor about side effects your medications may be causing (and about re-evaluating medications if needed)
- Consider therapy or medication if you have anxiety/depression
- Use lubricants during intercourse for short-term relief from vaginal dryness
- Use vaginal moisturizers daily for long-term relief from vaginal dryness

- Ask your provider if vaginal estrogen is safe and appropriate for your symptoms before starting
- Experiment with different sexual positions
- Experiment with sexual aids such as vibrators
- Practice pelvic floor (Kegel) exercises to strengthen pelvic muscles

Life after cancer is a marathon not a sprint! You and your partner have gone through a journey that probably felt at times like a roller coaster ride of ups and downs. Now it's time to enjoy life on solid ground and rediscover the things you put on the back burner during cancer treatment, including intimacy. Be patient and empathic to each other and don't hesitate to seek professional help. Your sexual health is an important component of your overall health and quality of life as a cancer survivor!

Four Ways to Thank Your Cancer Caregivers

Navigating cancer is emotionally and physically draining. Looking back, you will probably agree that the unwavering support of your cancer caregivers played a huge role in your recovery. You may have had friends and family who seemed to instinctively know what you needed and stepped up without being asked. They may have given you rides to and from your appointments, made meals, did laundry, took care of your yard, helped with the care of your children or pets. They may have simply provided a shoulder to cry one or a listening ear. Your cancer caregivers were an unofficial yet important part of your care team. Thanks to their care and support you were able to focus on your recovery.

It is never too late to say, "Thank you," to the unsung heroes that helped you on your journey. Now that you are a survivor and no longer as reliant on your caregivers you may be looking for a way to let them know how much you appreciated their assistance. Becoming the giver instead of the receiver may also feel empowering to you. The following are a few ideas of ways you could show your appreciation.



1. The Gift of Food

A meal delivery service is a wonderful way to thank caregivers who cooked for you and your family. There are many popular meal delivery services such as: **Hello Fresh**, **Blue Apron**, **Chef'd**, **Green Chef**, etc. They also cater to particular diets such as Keto, gluten free, vegetarian, vegan, and pescatarian in addition to a regular menu. The meal kits are delivered to the doorstep of the recipient with all required ingredients and recipe cards to create healthy, restaurant quality meals at home.

However, these delivery services can be expensive. If they are not an option due to financial constraints, other options would be to make a home cooked meal for your caregiver in return or bake a dessert to say thank you. A gift card to a favorite restaurant would be equally nice.

2. Pick Them Up for an Outing

You could arrange to take them to do something special. If they helped you through your cancer journey they must care deeply

for you. For female survivors thanking female caretakers one example would be a mani/pedi date. A round of golf or another sporting event would be ideas for a male caretaker. They will love spending time with the healthy you. Not only do your caregivers deserve a bit of pampering but so do you.

3. Give Them a Splurge

The most selfless people are often happy to spend money on others but reluctant to spend it on themselves. Consider surprising your caregiver with a gift certificate to a nice restaurant, a gift card to their favorite store, a bottle of their favorite wine or spirits, tickets to an upcoming concert or sporting event or a luxurious floral arrangement. Another idea would be to hire a housekeeper or cleaning service. A reputable cleaning person or cleaning service to deep clean your caregiver's home would be a gift they might not give themselves. Now that you have finished cancer treatment, you and your caregivers have turned a page on life and entered a new chapter. It would be nice to help your caregiver breathe easier and celebrate this fresh start with a spotless house.

4. Put Together a Personalized Gift Basket

A gift basket is a wonderful way to acknowledge your caregiver. Gift baskets can be purchased or created by you. You have probably gotten to know your caregivers well during the time you spent together while you were going through treatment. For example, does your caregiver have a favorite candy, wine, hobby, store, or snack? Do you have a photo of the two of you that you could frame? Small luxury items like bath products, books, lotions, slippers, coffee/tea, a mug, etc. A card with a handwritten sentiment would be treasured. A gift basket does not need to be expensive but could be one of the easiest ways to show you care about them the way they cared for you.

The friends and loved ones who stood by you following your diagnosis did it because they care about you. You have already given them the gift they really wanted—you beat cancer! Any gesture beyond that is icing on the cake. Whether you spend money thanking them or simply write them a heartfelt note, showing your caregivers your appreciation will make them feel good. It will make you feel good as well!



Family Counseling Helps the Healing Process

Transitioning from a cancer patient to a cancer survivor signifies that you have physically healed from cancer; however, it does not mean that you've physically healed from the effects of chemo, nor does it signify that you have healed emotionally. Emotional wellbeing is much harder to measure. And right now, you and your family could be experiencing a lot of different feelings.

Because cancer is hard on everyone in a family, counseling is a wonderful way for you and your loved ones to address concerns, underlying feelings, and fears in a safe and healthy setting.

Seeing a Family Counselor Is a Sign of Strength

Mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are incredibly common across the entire population. According to the **World Health Organization**, one in four people will be affected by some type of mental health issue during his/her life. While these conditions are common their treatment is not always seen as a priority. However, addressing the emotional effects of cancer on you and your family is an important part of the healing process.

What Can You Expect from Family Counseling?

Family counseling sessions vary according to the specific needs and current difficulties of the family. Examples of scenarios survivors and their families may face include:

- Young children who have become very clingy and needy as a result of a parent's cancer.
- Survivors' spouses who feel resentment about not feeling appreciated for carrying an extra burden while the survivor was undergoing treatment.
- Survivors who don't feel like they were supported sufficiently during treatment.
- Spouses who are having trouble getting past the patient-caregiver roles.
- Family members who are depressed about finances.
- Family members who are scared and anxious about the cancer recurring.

Counseling can help family members better understand one another's perspectives, learn new skills and strategies to cope with challenges, and better communicate feelings and needs.

Virginia is fortunate to have a prevalent number of family counselors whose areas of focus include family counseling for cancer patients and survivors. Your treatment team can recommend counselors in your area. You can also search for counselors online, Psychology Today has an online **database** of "cancer therapists in Virginia."

Remember that there are many resources for you and your family as you transition and adjust to a new normal.

Our cancer specialists at Virginia Oncology Associates understand that life after cancer requires adjusting. That's why they've put together cancer survivor resources to help you address some of your worries.



Nutrition and Exercise for Cancer Survivors

We have all heard that eating a well-balanced diet and being physically active are two of the most important things you can do for both your physical and mental health. This is especially true for cancer survivors.

It's Important to Achieve and Maintain a Healthy Weight

Gaining Weight After Cancer Treatment

Many patients lose a significant amount of weight while they're being treated for cancer, most often as a side effect of cancer treatment. Patients who received chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy often experienced nausea, a loss of appetite, or dry mouth which makes it hard to swallow food. The taste and smell of food may have also changed, making foods that you normally liked seem unappetizing. These things can all lead to less food intake and ultimately weight loss during cancer treatment.

Losing Weight After Cancer Treatment

While some patients need to regain weight after cancer treatment, others may need to focus on losing weight. Some medications cause patients to gain weight. Eating to cope with stress is a common reaction which can lead to weight gain. Or you may have been physically active before treatment but then stopped exercising during treatments resulting in weight gain and/or loss of muscle tone.

If your cancer treatment left you overweight or underweight, it's important to take steps to return to a weight that's in the normal range for you.

Diet and Exercise Affect Your Weight, and Much More

Foods for Cancer Survivors

It's true: "You are what you eat." 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 are your pantry and refrigerator stocked with? Is there an abundance of processed foods? Is there hardly any food because you rely on dining out? If so, it may be time to re-evaluate your habits. Consider asking your cancer care team to recommend a nutritionist to help you get on track. Take it in small steps so that you don't change everything at once. But work towards eating a balanced diet that is not filled with convenience or over processed foods.

Exercise for Cancer Survivors

Exercise is also important for cancer survivors. If you aren't planning time for exercise in your routine, now is the time to start. Fortunately, you can do this slowly by adding a little activity at a time. And, you don't have to go to the gym. Simply walking in the park, lifting light weights at home, or going on a bike ride count. Just be sure you make time for this almost every day. When you find an activity you enjoy, exercise stops becoming a chore and a part of your daily enjoyment!



Living a Healthy Life After Cancer

Many cancer survivors say they view their lives in three stages:

1. Life before being diagnosed with cancer
2. Life while being treated for cancer
3. Life after cancer

If there is 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 of survivors' main "life after cancer" goals is often to live a healthy lifestyle to reduce the likelihood that they'll have to live through another serious illness – cancer or otherwise.

Lifestyle Choices that Affect Your Health

Many of the things you can do to live a healthy lifestyle after cancer are the same things anyone can do to live a healthy lifestyle. These include:

- **Exercising regularly.** Physical activity helps with physical and mental health. Even low-impact activities, like walking, can have major positive effects on present and future health.
- **Embracing a healthy diet.** It really is true: You are what you eat. If your diet consists mostly of healthy foods (vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean proteins), you are more likely to be healthy. If you're in the habit of eating processed, packaged, high-sugar foods modified from foods that occur naturally, you are sabotaging your health. These types of foods have been proven to contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and unhealthy cholesterol and triglyceride levels
- **Avoiding all tobacco products.** It has been proven time and time again that smoking and chewing tobacco are harmful to your health. Tobacco has no place in a healthy lifestyle.
- **Limiting alcohol use.** If you choose to drink alcohol, drink moderately (no more than one drink per day for women, no more than two drinks per day for men.)
- **Limiting sun exposure.** Long-term and/or excessive sun exposure can contribute to skin cancer. Try to avoid the direct sun between the hours of 10 am and 4

pm, when the sun's rays are strongest. Using a broad-spectrum sunscreen of at least SPF 15 that shields out both UVA and UVB rays will help protect your skin.

- **Being diligent about visiting your doctor for regular checkups.** If you do become ill, the sooner it is detected and the sooner treatment begins, the better the prognosis usually is.
- **Being diligent about taking prescription medications as directed.** If your doctor prescribes you medication for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, etc., it is important to take your medication as directed and refill your prescriptions in a timely fashion. Even if you "feel fine," never discontinue a prescription medication without your doctor's approval.
- **Sticking to your regular cancer screening schedules.** Depending on what type of cancer you had, it's important to continue being screened for skin, colon, breast, cervical and other cancers. If you develop a recurrence or a new type of cancer, the sooner it's identified the sooner you can begin treating it.

Embracing Healthy Habits is Especially Important for Cancer Survivors

Everyone can benefit from adopting the advice above. For cancer survivors, it's especially critical to strive to live a healthy life. According to the American Cancer Society, survivors of many cancers, such as breast cancer and skin cancer, have a heightened risk of developing a second cancer or having a cancer recurrence.

Many survivors discover that in order to lead a healthy lifestyle after cancer, they need to change some of their thought processes and create new healthy routines. Your pre-cancer life may have involved unhealthy habits, such as drinking three or four glasses of wine a night, eating fast food several times a week, working to maintain your tan, avoiding exercise at all costs, etc. As a survivor, you've entered into a new stage of life that can (and should) be the beginning of a new, healthier you.

Why not recruit your family to join you in your pursuit of a healthy lifestyle? Their health will benefit and you'll be more likely to make healthy choices when others around you are, too. Another way to stay motivated is to volunteer to help cancer patients or join a cancer survivor's support group. Share with them about your efforts to stay healthy. You'll be modeling healthy habits they'll hopefully emulate, and they'll help keep you accountable!



Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

Following the completion of cancer treatment, your oncology team is likely to suggest you begin some physical activity. The amount of exercise will be different for each person and will be based on the type of cancer treatments and surgeries you received, as well as side effects you may be experiencing.

Exercise is important for cancer survivors so that you can:

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

According to research published by the **American Cancer Society**, exercise can help some cancer survivors reduce the risk of cancer recurrence. An active lifestyle can also help reduce the risk of developing other health conditions including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and even other types of cancer. Whether you're a recent cancer survivor or have been cancer-free for years, it's never too late to start adding exercise into your daily routine for better health.

In Early Survivorship, Talk to Your Doctor about Exercise

Anyone who is embarking on an exercise regimen for the first time or after a prolonged period of inactivity should talk to their doctor first. As a cancer survivor, make sure to ask your doctor questions such as:

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

Considerations When Planning Exercise as a Cancer Survivor

Realizing the importance of nutrition and physical activity to improve cancer survivors' long-term treatment outcomes and quality of life, the American Cancer Society convened a group of nutrition, physical activity, and survivorship experts to identify best practices regarding nutrition and physical activities after cancer treatment. A group of physicians published their findings in CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians. Some notable findings regarding physical activity for cancer survivors include:

- For at least a few months after chemotherapy, or if you have been told that your white blood cell count is low, avoid public gyms and public pools where bacteria and viruses may be easily picked up on equipment or from the pool water.
- If you are feeling fatigued, try to get in at least 10 minutes of light exercise but avoid overdoing it or pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion. Some days you'll feel better than others. Go a little longer on those days if you can. This can actually help improve fatigue for some survivors.
- If you have a skin reaction to radiation, or recently completed radiation therapy, try to avoid chlorine exposure in a pool or too much sun from outdoor exercise.
- If you have nerve pain (neuropathy) or tingling in your hands or feet, you may feel off balance. In this case, you may want to ride a stationary bike or walk on a treadmill where you can hold on.

Tips to Transition to an Active Lifestyle



When you think of physical activity as fun, but also a necessary step in staying healthy and reducing the risk of cancer recurring, you'll find it much easier to commit to an exercise plan. You'll also be more enthusiastic about exercise if you enjoy it. Especially in your early days as a cancer survivor, any activity is helpful! Walking your dog, walking in the park with a friend, taking a bike ride, even dancing around the living room with your grandchildren counts as exercise. The American Cancer Society recommends that as a cancer survivor beginning a new exercise routine you start slow, choose activities you enjoy, and aim to eventually exercise for at least 150 minutes per week.

You absolutely can break up that time into manageable intervals. Instead of going to the gym for 30 minutes one day, exercising at home for three 10-minute stints is just as effective. It's often more manageable to work in frequent, short exercise breaks than committing to one long session. Additionally, if your doctor has instructed you to do both strength-building exercises (like lifting hand weights) and cardiovascular exercises (like walking or jogging), you can alternate between the two types of exercise. Not only will this help your body recover between workouts, it will help you stay more interested in your exercise routine.

When you learn to embrace exercise as something that may not have been possible during cancer treatment but that you've been cleared to do as a cancer survivor, you'll learn to appreciate more about life because you will feel better. Eventually, exercise can once again become a natural, enjoyable part of your daily routine!

Alcohol After Cancer?

As a cancer survivor, your goal is probably to resume your familiar lifestyle as quickly as possible. You may be feeling more like your old self again with a growing appetite and the ability to enjoy the flavors in food once again. If you also enjoyed an alcoholic beverage before cancer, you may be wondering if that's acceptable after cancer treatment. You may be right to think twice about drinking alcohol after cancer.

Research: Drinking Alcohol is Risky

Some research shows that drinking even a small amount of alcohol increases the risk of developing cancer. In its Report on Carcinogens, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Toxicology Program lists alcoholic beverages as known human carcinogens. The more alcohol a person drinks (especially when they drink regularly over time) the higher the risk of developing cancer, especially head and neck cancers, esophageal cancer, liver cancer, breast cancer, and colorectal cancers.

In 2017, the American Society of Clinical Oncology released a **statement** identifying alcohol as a "definite risk factor for cancer" and noting that 5% to 6% of new cancers and cancer deaths globally are directly attributable to alcohol.

Research: Moderate Alcohol Consumption is Beneficial

It's no secret that alcohol is linked to health problems. The problem is, alcohol has also been linked to health benefits. According to a report from **Harvard University's School of Public Health**, alcohol can be "both a tonic and a poison" depending primarily on the dose. Possible health benefits of



moderate alcohol consumption, according to Harvard, include a decreased risk of:

- **Heart attack**
- **Ischemic (clot-caused) stroke**
- **Peripheral vascular disease**
- **Sudden cardiac death**
- **Death from cardiovascular causes**
- **Gallstones**
- **Type 2 diabetes.**

Additionally, the National Cancer Institute notes that multiple studies have concluded that alcohol consumption is associated with a decreased risk of renal cell (kidney) cancer and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

If You Choose to Drink Alcohol After Cancer Treatment, What Should You Know?

All things considered from a risk-benefit scenario, it's better for your health to avoid alcohol than to drink alcohol. If you choose to drink, however, there is one thing most experts absolutely agree on: **Drinking in moderation is the key to minimizing the negative health effects of alcohol and benefitting from the potential health benefits of alcohol – whether you're a cancer survivor or have never been diagnosed.**

How much is safe?

The National Cancer Institute recommends that women have no more than one drink per day and men have no more than two drinks per day. A "drink" is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 8 ounces of malt liquor, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces (a shot) of liquor. What type of alcohol you drink is as important as how much you drink. Beer, wine, and liquor contain roughly half an ounce of alcohol per serving. Alcohol content is listed as alcohol by volume (ABV) or alcohol proof. The higher the ABV of an alcoholic beverage, the less of it you can safely consume. In general,

- Liquor is 40% - 50% ABV (80 to 100-proof)
- Wines are 9%-15% ABV
- Beers and hard ciders are 3%-7% ABV

What else should you do?

The report from Harvard also notes that if you choose to drink alcohol, make sure you're getting at least 600 micrograms per day of folate, or folic acid, since alcohol blocks the absorption of this important B vitamin. Foods high in folic acid include, leafy green vegetables such as broccoli and spinach, banana, citrus, melons, eggs, asparagus, beans, poultry, pork, and fortified cereals. You can also talk to your doctor about adding a folic acid supplement to your routine.

Most importantly, if you drink alcohol, follow the guidelines outlined above for responsible drinking to protect your most important asset: your health.



Tobacco After Cancer

You probably know tobacco use is bad for your health. In fact, over-the-counter tobacco products are legally required to include one of the following warning labels reminding the public of tobacco's dangers, especially the dangers of cancer.

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.**

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.**

Unquestionably, tobacco is harmful to your health. Yet, millions of people use it. In 2016, 15.5% of all adults and 13% of all adult **cancer survivors** reported being current cigarette smokers. Cigarette and cigar smoking is not only harmful to smokers, but it's also harmful to those around them. Secondhand smoke exposure (breathing in smoke from another person's cigarette or cigar) increases the risks of cancer, stroke, and heart attack.

Smoking During or after Cancer Treatment

If you're a cancer survivor, all of the aforementioned warnings about 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. Increases the risk that your cancer will recur
2. Increases the risk that you will develop a **subsequent** primary cancer (different cancer than you were already treated for)
3. Increases your **risk** of dying if you were treated for smoking-related cancers. Your risk of dying will decrease if you stop smoking
4. May reduce the effectiveness of cancer treatment
5. May worsen the long-term side effects of cancer treatment, including fatigue, nausea, hair loss, and pain
6. Has a negative effect on pulmonary and immune function and wound healing
7. May sabotage your efforts and ability to exercise regularly, which most cancer survivors are encouraged to do to benefit their health
8. May undermine your ability to regain financial stability if your cancer caused you financial problems

Get Help to Quit Tobacco for Good

If you want to do what's best for your health and the health of those around you, you'll quit using tobacco products entirely. While that is often easier said than done, if you set your mind to it you can succeed!

If you're ready to stop smoking, talk to your doctor about the best approach for you, which may include slowly tapering the amount of tobacco you use, quitting cold turkey, using nicotine replacement gum or patches, etc. There are also plenty of other resources available to help you quit. If you are one of our local Virginians, the Virginia Department of Health has developed a program called **Quit Now Virginia**, 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 1-877-777-6534. 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. You survived cancer. You can kick your tobacco habit, too.



Managing Continuing Side-Effects as a Cancer Survivor

You're now a **cancer survivor**, but even though your cancer treatments have ended and your oncologist has given you the green light to resume your pre-cancer activities such as exercise and work, you may not feel entirely back to your "pre-cancer self." Chemotherapy and other cancer treatment drugs, radiation therapy, and surgeries that were used to treat cancer often have long-term (sometimes even permanent) side effects.

More Research is Being Conducted on Long-term Treatment Effects

Cancer survival rates have increased and will continue to increase, according to the National Cancer Institute. By 2026, the organization expects the number of survivors to reach 20.3 million, which is an increase of 31% (more than 4 million survivors) over a 10-year period. With cancer survival rates steadily climbing, there's increasing interest in the survivors' quality of life.

Researchers at the University of Australia, for example, analyzed the pharmaceutical records of nearly 4,000 prostate cancer survivors from 2003 to 2014. They concluded that survivors treated with a common prostate cancer therapy were at increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease, depression, diabetes, gastric acid disorders, high blood cholesterol, osteoporosis, and inflammatory/painful conditions after their cancer treatment ended.

Another study focusing on gynecological cancer survivors who had undergone radiation therapy concluded that these survivors experienced more urinary, gastrointestinal, and sexual side effects after cancer treatment than survivors who were not treated with radiation therapy.

This increasing interest in survivors' side effects has prompted research into understanding which treatments produce fewer side effects after treatment is over.

Side Effects that Cancer Survivors May Experience

Just as every patient's cancer is treated with a unique, tailored approach, lingering treatment side effects vary from survivor to survivor. Some people experience no long-term side effects at all. Others experience several. Some of the most common long-term side effects of cancer treatment include:



- Osteoporosis
- Sleeping disorders
- Dental disorders
- Generalized fatigue
- Sexual side effects
- Heart problems
- Mental fogginess
- Anxiety
- Neuropathy

If you're experiencing any of these side effects or any type of pain, make sure to let your cancer care team know. Your doctors -- and other survivors experiencing similar symptoms -- can help you learn how to manage long-term side effects.

Managing Late and Long-term Side Effects of Cancer Treatment



Side effects related to cancer or cancer treatment that occur months or even years after you have completed your cancer treatments are considered "late side effects." Side effects of cancer treatment that don't go away after your treatment ends are known as "long-term side effects." Working with your cancer-care team to manage late- and long-term side effects of cancer treatment is important to your continued recovery and quality of life.

Late and Long-term Side Effects Survivors May Experience

Once cancer treatment ends and you become a cancer survivor, you may not be entirely free from residual effects of your illness. Long after cancer treatment ends, sometimes years after treatment ends, you may experience cancer- or cancer-treatment-related side effects.

The specific late- and long-term side effects that you may experience as a cancer survivor will depend on:

- The type and location of cancer you had
- The type of cancer treatments you received including the dosages of medication or radiation that were given.
- Your age and physical condition during treatment
- Your family history
- Any non-cancer-related health problems you have

Late- and long-term side effects can be physical or emotional and may include:

- Anxiety, depression and fear of recurrence
- Fatigue
- Secondary cancers such as skin, breast, or thyroid cancers
- Infertility
- Growth, development, and hormonal problems (especially among prepubescent cancer survivors)
- Learning and memory problems
- Heart problems such as abnormal heart rhythm, high blood pressure and heart muscle weakness
- Lung and breathing problems
- Dental problems, such as dry mouth, tooth decay and gum disease
- Digestive problems, such as chronic heartburn, constipation, or diarrhea
- Hearing loss
- Vision problems including dry eye and cataracts
- Bone, joint, and tissue problems such as osteoporosis and joint pain
- Neuropathy

What Should You Talk to Your Doctor About?

Especially if you are a new cancer survivor, make sure to ask your oncologist about what long-term cancer treatment effects you are most likely to experience. Some may be very common for certain types of cancer treatment and they can advise you on what you might expect. In fact, if you haven't already done so, it's a good idea to schedule an appointment to talk about what to keep an eye out for. Make sure to take notes or bring along a friend or relative to take notes for you.

Ask your cancer care team for a detailed list of all of the cancer treatments and dosages you received and keep this list in a safe place. If you develop late side effects months or years down the road, you can give this list to your doctors to help them diagnose and treat what is bothering you.

Other questions to ask your oncologist include:

- Is there anything I can do to reduce the likelihood of developing these late side effects?
- What warning signs should I watch out for, and when should I visit the doctor?
- Can you explain the differences between possible cancer or cancer-treatment "side effects" to watch for versus cancer "symptoms" that might indicate my cancer may have returned?
- Considering the cancer treatments I received, should I be monitored by any medical specialists (like an optometrist or cardiologist) to keep an eye out for late side effects?



Cancer Survivorship: A New Normal

Experiencing cancer is life changing in many ways. Late- and long-term side effects may continue to affect you well into the future. Make sure to find out from your cancer care team what you might experience down the road. This way, you'll be able to identify potential cancer treatment side effects quickly and contact your doctor promptly to have them checked out.

Sleep Disorders After Cancer Treatment



When you were being treated for cancer, you likely experienced some unpleasant side effects of the medications and therapies prescribed. It is also likely these side effects weren't entirely shocking because you were told to expect them.

As you transitioned to being a cancer survivor, you likely expected the unpleasant side effects to go away. Fortunately, many of them likely did.

One side effect that often continues to affect cancer survivors (or that may develop as a brand-new symptom after cancer treatment is complete) is a sleep disorder. Sleep disorders in cancer patients can occur during or after multiple cancer treatments including chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, immunotherapy, and surgery.

While sleep disturbances often improve for cancer survivors over time, lingering sleep problems may persist for years after cancer treatment ends.

What are Sleep Disorders?

Sleep disorder is an umbrella term encompassing several conditions that can prevent you from getting sufficient, restful sleep. Conditions in this category include:

- **Insomnia** - difficulty staying asleep, and waking too early or being unable to return to sleep. Symptoms may interfere with daily functioning.
- **Hypersomnia** - feeling unusually sleepy during the day and falling asleep unexpectedly while reading, having a conversation, watching TV, or driving.

- **Obstructive sleep apnea** - includes snoring, gasping for breath, stopping breathing during sleep, or repeated pauses in breathing during sleep.
- **Restless leg syndrome** - an uncomfortable and/or irresistible urge to move the legs while resting or feeling drowsy.
- **Narcolepsy** - unusual daytime sleepiness and/or temporary loss of muscle control/brief moments of paralysis while falling asleep or waking.

Cancer survivors may also experience sleep disorders that result from physical changes caused by cancer or surgery, side effects of medications or other treatments, stress and anxiety, depression, fear of cancer recurrence, caregiving responsibilities, financial stress, or health problems not associated with your cancer.

Strategies to Combat Sleep Problems

While medications and behavioral therapy may be required to effectively treat sleep disorders following cancer treatment, the following lifestyle changes can improve the quality and/or duration of your sleep.

- Maintain a regular, physician-approved exercise routine.
- If possible, try to safely expose yourself to sunlight each day, but be sure to follow recommended sun protection practices.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, including lean proteins, healthy fats, whole grains and, at least, 2.5 cups of vegetables per day and 1.5–2 cups of fruit per day, unless otherwise directed by your healthcare team.
- Avoid heavy meals within three hours before bedtime.
- Discuss the potential benefits of massage and/or acupuncture, specific to your condition, with your healthcare provider.
- Stick to a regular sleep schedule. If you cannot fall asleep within 15 minutes, get up and do something relaxing, such as reading, taking a bath or shower, or listening to quiet music, until you feel sleepy.
- Try to avoid daytime naps when possible.
- Avoid bright lights, electronics such as televisions, smartphones, tablets, and computers, and other activities that stimulate your senses within a one to two hours before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine in late afternoon and evening.
- Avoid nicotine.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

Talk to Your Doctor about Post-Cancer Sleep Disorders

As with any troubling physical or mental conditions you experience after cancer treatment, if you're experiencing problems related to sleep, talk to your doctor.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Specific symptoms that should prompt medical evaluation, include persistent difficulty sleeping, loud snoring/stopping breathing, excessive daytime sleepiness, falling asleep while driving or during activities requiring attention, anxiety/depression interfering with sleep, and worsening fatigue despite adequate sleep.

As you describe your sleep-related problems, your doctor will likely ask you questions about your sleep habits and possibly order a sleep study. A sleep study monitors brain activity, breathing patterns, and heart rate while you are asleep in a controlled environment. Sometimes, a sleep study will indicate a physical problem that your doctor can diagnose and treat.

When your doctor isn't able to identify a specific physical explanation for your sleep problem, they may prescribe sleep medications and/or recommend Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I), which can help "retrain your brain" to relax and sleep. CBT-I is considered a first-line treatment for chronic insomnia as it can improve sleep behaviors while avoiding the potential side effects of medications.

As a cancer survivor, you've beaten one significant health obstacle. Taking steps to get quality sleep is important to maintaining your mental and physical health. Sleep disorders that persist over time can increase your risk of other health problems including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, infections, weight gain, anxiety, and depression.



Bone Health After Cancer Treatment



It's no secret that cancer treatment takes an emotional and physical toll on patients, and leaves cancer survivors dealing with some long-term side effects. According to the American Cancer Society, the goals of cancer treatment include shrinking cancerous tumors to make them easier to remove surgically, killing cancer cells in the body, and/or controlling cancer so it does not grow and spread. Chemotherapy, steroid medications, and hormonal therapies used to achieve these goals sometimes have unwelcome side effects, such as accelerated bone loss, potentially leading to osteopenia and/or osteoporosis.

What is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis, the most common type of bone disorder, occurs when the body breaks down more bone tissue than it creates. This causes the bones to become thin and develop holes that make them weak, brittle, and more likely to break. Osteoporosis may occur as a result of aging, genetics, long-term inactivity, and excess smoking and alcohol use. Additionally, osteoporosis can be caused by:

- Bone cancer
- Certain types of cancers including multiple myeloma and breast, lung, ovarian, prostate, and testicular cancers

Cancer Treatments Cause Diminished Bone Health

Certain types of treatments for cancer have been known to increase the risk of osteoporosis in cancer survivors. These treatments include:

- Aromatase inhibitors including Arimidex, Femara, and Aromasin
- Certain chemotherapy drugs
- Immunosuppressive medications that slow or stop the immune system, including methotrexate
- Androgen-deprivation therapy (ADT) that reduces hormones levels
- Steroid medications including prednisone and cortisone

Symptoms of Osteoporosis After Cancer Treatment

Because your cancer treatment may have increased your risk of developing osteoporosis, it is important to know the signs of bone loss and talk with your doctors if you experience them. Symptoms of bone loss include:

- Experiencing back and/or joint pain or stiffness
- Experiencing jaw pain, swelling, and/or infection
- Becoming shorter over time
- Developing a stooped posture or curved upper back
- Breaking a bone after a minor injury or fall

How to Keep Your Bones Healthy After Cancer Treatment

As a cancer survivor, if you have not yet developed osteoporosis, you can lower your risk of developing it in the future by:

- Avoiding tobacco
- Eating foods rich in calcium and vitamin D
- Staying physically active
- Limiting alcohol consumption
- Seeing your doctor as recommended

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

Getting regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight are especially important if you already have osteoporosis. Regular exercise triggers the body to create new bone cells; being underweight can contribute to bone loss. Additionally, make sure to take steps to reduce your risk of tripping and falling: Wear shoes that fit well, declutter your living space, have your vision checked regularly and wear corrective lenses if needed, and consider exercises to improve your balance.

Osteoporosis is a disease that develops over time and cannot be seen or felt. Knowing that you are at increased risk of developing bone problems, talk to your doctor about whether you should have 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.

Common Concerns and Feelings after Cancer Treatment



Survivors may experience multiple emotional and physical challenges simultaneously while adapting to life after treatment such as:

- Changes to your body's appearance or abilities as a result of cancer treatment, surgery, changes in energy levels, ongoing side effects and weight changes.
- You may have difficulties with your memory, concentration, multitasking, and word-finding skills which can be frightening. "Chemobrain" is sometimes used to describe these symptoms. However, the more accurate term is "cancer-related cognitive impairment."
- It can be difficult to jump back into your pre-cancer social life, especially with family, friends, and coworkers who may want to talk about how you're feeling. Remember that others may have different expectations than you, as the survivor, and it is common to become tired of discussing your cancer experience.
- You may feel stressed out about your financial situation which can include going back to work, medical expenses, insurance coverage, and other financial obligations.
- One of the most common concerns among survivors is about cancer returning. Anxiety may increase when it comes time for follow-up appointments, imaging studies, and lab tests.
- You may feel isolated after treatment. While you were being treated for cancer, your support system was expanded to include healthcare providers and caregivers, in addition to your family and friends who drove you places, cooked, ran errands, and helped you maintain your home. Returning to doing things independently can leave you feeling like your practical and emotional support systems have taken a step back after treatment.
- You may feel uncertainty about long-term health, family plans, work goals, and life priorities.

Mental Health as a Cancer Survivor

Cancer has more than a physical impact on patients. Stress, sadness, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear are common and understandable responses to cancer diagnosis and treatment.

After treatment ends, you may still experience emotional challenges as you have more time to reflect on your new "normal" and adjust to life after cancer.

What Can You Do To Improve Your Mental Health After Cancer Treatment?

1. First, emotional ups and downs are common and there is no single "right" way to feel after cancer treatment.

2. Discuss the feelings and concerns with your closest family members, friends, caregivers, spiritual leaders, and other trusted individuals. Together you can decide what can be done to help you feel better. Talking openly can help reduce feelings of isolation.



3. Focus on manageable goals and small, realistic changes. These should be issues you have control over such as your work situation, or getting back to a healthy weight.

4. Incorporate regular physical activity to improve mood, reduce stress, increase energy, and support your overall well-being.

5. Try specific stress-management techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, mindfulness, journaling, yoga, creative arts, and relaxation exercises.

6. Stay connected with others and participate in meaningful activities.

7. Consider joining a support group to connect with other cancer survivors.

8. At your next appointment, be sure to talk with your healthcare team about your emotional difficulties. They may be able to offer ways to help.

9. Determine whether you might benefit from professional counseling. Mental health professionals can provide effective treatment for anxiety, depression, fear of recurrence, and adjustment challenges.

When to Seek Additional Help



Signs that additional mental health support may be needed, include:

- Sadness, anxiety, or hopelessness lasting more than two weeks
- Emotional distress interfering with daily activities or relationships
- Panic attacks or overwhelming fear
- Difficulty performing normal responsibilities at home or work
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Concerns about alcohol or substance use
- Feelings of hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm

Anyone experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide should seek emergency medical assistance, or call 988 immediately.

It is important to remember that emotional health is as important as physical health. Seeking support is a sign of strength rather than a sign of weakness. With time, support, and appropriate resources, many survivors can adapt to life after cancer and thrive during survivorship.

Understanding and Managing the Fear of Cancer Recurrence

The day your oncologist determined you were cancer-free was probably one of the best days of your life. You might have even rung the bell on your last treatment as a celebration! While learning you're cancer-free is definitely great news, no one can say with certainty that you will remain cancer-free forever. As a cancer survivor, you're probably excited for the future but also a little anxious about it at the same time.

The Question on All Cancer Survivors' Minds: 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, fear of cancer recurrence is an issue for survivors. Without professional help, the



study continues, this fear will not necessarily get better over time – even in cancer survivors whose actual risk of cancer recurrence is low.

Tips for Managing Fear of Cancer Recurrence

What should you do if you're not able to turn off the "What if my cancer returns?" thoughts in your brain? Strategies for managing fear of cancer recurrence are very similar to strategies for managing other common fears, such as: What if an intruder breaks in while I'm sleeping? What if I get fired from my job? What if I'm the victim of a random crime? And on and on. You need to take whatever steps you can to reduce the likelihood that your fear will become reality. You also need to train your brain not to obsess over uncertainties you cannot control.

By being diligent about regular post-cancer checkups and screenings and following your oncologist's instructions about diet, exercise, medication, etc., you can take control of your fear of recurrence. According to an American Cancer Society **report** on cancer treatment and survivorship:

- Post-treatment physical activity reduces the risks of cancer recurrence and increases overall survival rates.
- Remaining overweight or obese after treatment reduces long-term survival rates.
- Smoking after cancer treatment increases the risk of cancer recurrence.

When you do everything in your power to prevent recurrence, you can relax a bit.

What is tougher is learning not to obsess about the things you simply cannot control. Seeking professional help from a therapist, participating in a cancer survivor support group, and discussing your fears with your oncology health care team are all helpful tools to help you cope with fear of cancer recurrence and eventually train your brain to not fixate on future uncertainties you can't control.

The bottom line is, even when cancer survivors do everything right, cancer sometimes recurs. You can make yourself sick with worry thinking about cancer recurrence or you can learn to redirect your thoughts about this fear and avoid dwelling on the topic. Worrying will not prevent cancer recurrence! When you live in fear of recurrence, you're robbing yourself of precious cancer-free moments you can and should be enjoying!

If you discover that you're "stuck" in worrying mode, you might want to consider seeking professional help from a therapist who can teach you strategies for redirecting your thoughts. If you are religious, talking to a clergy person can be comforting. Many survivors also find that discussing their concerns and fears with other cancer survivors in a survivorship support group is helpful.



Cognitive Changes and Neuropathy After Cancer Treatment

After you complete cancer treatment, you are likely relieved to be done with the frequent appointments, treatment schedules, and uncertainty. However, some side effects of treatment take much longer to go away, and these can affect your daily life, independence, and emotional well-being as a cancer survivor.

Two common examples of longer-lasting effects of cancer treatment are cancer-related cognitive impairment and neuropathy.

Cancer-Related Cognitive Impairment

During your cancer journey, you may have complained about suffering from “chemobrain” which is the common term for chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy (CIPN). However, experiencing cognitive impairment such as forgetfulness or absent-mindedness can occur during or after cancer treatment. Other potential causes or contributing factors of cancer-related cognitive impairment include:

- Chemotherapy
- Hormone therapy
- Immunotherapy
- Radiation therapy
- Fatigue
- Stress
- Sleep problems
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Cancer itself

Symptoms of cancer-related cognitive impairment include having difficulty with:

- Short-term memory (remembering recent events or conversations)
- Finding the right words during conversations
- Learning new information
- Your brain's processing speed (how long it takes to draw conclusions or understand information)
- Multi-tasking
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Concentrating and focusing

Many survivors notice gradual improvement during the first year, while some symptoms may persist longer. Cognitive impairment can affect work, relationships, and quality of life.

If you're a cancer survivor suffering from cognitive changes, there are steps you can take to improve your mental functioning. These include:

- Begin or gradually increase exercise, with a goal of exercising for at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise as approved by your healthcare provider.
- Do puzzles, reading, games, learning opportunities, and cognitive training programs.
- Use reminders, calendars, note-taking apps, planners, and written task lists to help you remember.
- Break large tasks into smaller, manageable steps and focus on one task at a time.
- Get enough sleep, and try to stick to healthy sleep habits.
- Practice mindfulness, relaxation exercises, and meditation, or consider counseling.
- Seek medical help for depression, anxiety, fatigue, and chronic pain.
- Talk with your healthcare provider if cognitive symptoms interfere with work or your daily activities.

Chemotherapy-Induced Peripheral Neuropathy (CIPN)

Another long-lasting side effect of cancer treatment is called chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy (CIPN). Certain chemotherapy drugs can damage nerves in the hands, feet, arms, or legs. Symptoms of CIPN can begin during treatment or develop after treatment ends include:

- Numbness
- Tingling/pins-and-needles sensations
- Burning or shooting pain
- Increased sensitivity to touch

- Difficulty with balance
- Muscle weakness
- Problems with fine motor tasks
- Reduced ability to sense temperature, pain, or vibration

Neuropathy can also be caused by diabetes, malnutrition, alcohol use disorder, thyroid disease, kidney disease, and other non-cancer conditions.

Managing Neuropathy Symptoms

If you're experiencing neuropathy, experts continue to evaluate CIPN treatments. Regular physical activity and supervised exercise, physical therapy, occupational therapy, acupuncture when appropriate, cognitive behavioral therapy for chronic symptom management, support groups/ counseling for emotional support, and massage may also relieve symptoms.

Be sure to tell your therapist or chiropractor about your neuropathy symptoms before they begin any treatments or services.

Duloxetine is a medication that currently has the strongest evidence for treating painful CIPN. Other medications may be considered based on your symptoms and medical history.

How Long Does Neuropathy Last?

Chemo-induced neuropathy symptoms may worsen during treatment and peak in the months following chemotherapy. After that, symptoms may gradually improve over several months or years. In some cases, however, CIPN symptoms may be long-lasting or permanent.

Managing Daily Activities with Neuropathy

If you're experiencing difficulties with managing every day activities due to neuropathy, here are some practical strategies that may be helpful:

- Talk to your cancer care team about assistive devices that may be able to help you with difficult physical activities until you no longer need them
- Consider meeting with a physical and/or occupational therapist
- Consider counseling or joining a support group if neuropathy is affecting emotional well-being

- Use nightlights in your home's hallways, bathrooms, and bedrooms to avoid stepping on things and causing damage to your feet without knowing it.
- Remove loose rugs and other tripping hazards
- Use supportive, well-fitting shoes
- Use handrails, when available
- Avoid scalding your skin by testing the bath/shower water with your forearm or elbow
- Avoid using heating pads, electric blankets and hot water bottles on your feet, or areas of the body that are numb, as you may become burned without realizing it
- Routine foot and nail care by a qualified professional, if needed.
- Regularly check your feet and hands for cuts, blisters, burns, or sores that may be present, since you may not be able to feel them. This allows you to care for them before they become infected.

Once you have completed cancer treatment, you are not completely free of the side effects of cancer. It can be helpful to remind yourself that you have survived the biggest hurdle: cancer. You can also survive and thrive despite these long-term side effects of cancer treatment. Lasting physical or cognitive effects may improve with time, rehabilitation, healthy lifestyle habits, and support from the healthcare team.



Coping With Your Changing Body After Cancer Treatment

Cancer treatment may be over, but for many cancer survivors, there are some lasting effects on the body. Both men and women may experience physical changes that can affect their self-esteem. Find out what you can try as you cope with these physical changes that often affect our mental outlook.

Cancer Can Have a Long-Term Impact on Your Body

Depending on the type of cancer, the treatment process may have changed your body in very noticeable ways, some of which are permanent, some of which may not be permanent but could be evident for months or even years. All of these changes can impact your self-esteem and confidence while you learn to adjust and accept what's new for your post-treatment body.

Some of the most common permanent and long-term physical changes survivors must learn to cope with include:

- Scars from surgeries or the loss of a limb, breast or other body parts that may have been removed.
- Changes in your hair's texture and color after cancer treatment
- Ostomy (an opening created in the body so wastes can be collected in a bag)
- Loss of muscle tone as a result of inactivity. This is sometimes referred to as atrophy (at-tro-fee).

Other physical changes are side effects of medications used to treat your cancer, including:

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

These changes may not be long-lasting if you eat a healthy diet that includes good fats, lean proteins, and vegetables, and increase your level of physical activity to build muscle.

How to Cope With Changes to Your Body

People who have not experienced cancer and the physical changes it causes may not understand a survivor's struggle with body image. It's easy for people who have not walked in your shoes to assume 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, you're more than likely still going to care about it after going through cancer.

Having cancer does change people; many survivors emerge with a new perspective on what is and is not important in life. If you can learn 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. If you are feeling self-conscious about aspects of your appearance, the following advice may help.

- First and foremost, even if your body looks different, you are the same person on the inside. People who loved you before cancer will continue to love you and your post-cancer body!
- Be gentle with yourself. Allow yourself to grieve your pre-cancer body so you can eventually move past those normal feelings and begin to get used to your new body.
- 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. Others (such as scars) may become less noticeable over time.
- When you are ready, research possible reconstructive surgery, cosmetic solutions, and/or prosthetics that may be able to help you look more like your pre-cancer self.
- Share your feelings with other survivors who may understand what you're going through. Simply having your feelings validated can be helpful in some situations. Plus, those who have experienced similar changes can share their experiences and suggestions for ways to cope.

- Understand that curiosity is natural and be prepared for questions about your appearance. Friends, relatives, co-workers, and even strangers 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 discuss that.)
- Highlight the positive. You can still do things that make you 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 wardrobe items 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.

If you can't seem to get past feelings of sadness, inadequacy, or anger about your appearance, talk to your cancer care team and/or seek help from a professional counselor. At Virginia Oncology Associates, we have oncology social workers that are here to help guide you through life after cancer, including coping with your new body. The Look Good Feel Better program is also present in Virginia, and this American Cancer Society program is a free, public service support program that helps people with cancer deal with side effects of cancer treatment related to your appearance. In some cases, antidepressant medications may be able to boost your mood during the adjustment period.



Support For You

You're a cancer survivor now. Your cancer treatments are over, including frequent visits to the cancer center and the consistent check-ins with your cancer care team. You might feel a little bit "on your own" after treatment is over and you may be wondering, "Now what?"

You may feel excited and grateful, but also may feel anxious or scared. That's entirely normal! Every survivor is different and every survivor's life circumstances are different. Transitioning back to a "normal" life can take a little time and some help. Often, 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

After cancer treatment ends, you'll see your care team less often. But, you'll still need to see them for follow-up care. You will work with your cancer care providers to set and understand milestones and follow-up appointments that need to happen after your treatments are complete. They can also help you understand what to expect, one of the biggest sources of anxiety for survivors is fear of recurrence. Knowing that you have a comprehensive follow-up care plan in place will help alleviate this fear.

Get Organized

Since you may see your cancer care team less frequently, you'll once again rely more often on medical providers outside of oncology for your routine medical needs. It is important that all of your doctors are well-informed about the type of cancer you had and how your cancer was treated. Because cancer treatments may cause side effects that show up months or years after treatment ends, your doctors need to know what to watch for. Make sure you have detailed copies of your personal health records you can share with your doctors.

Get Emotional Support

You may be familiar with cancer patient support, but did you know it's also available for survivors? No one understands how you're feeling like other survivors who have walked a similar path. Cancer survivor support groups are safe spaces to discuss struggles, worries, and emotions that are common after treatment ends.

Any major life change can be a bit scary. It's normal that you may fear this transition from cancer patient to cancer survivor, and Virginia Oncology Associates wants to ensure that you are getting the help you need to transition into your new cancer survivor role.

Life After Cancer - Support Groups



By successfully completing cancer treatment, you're likely to be more appreciative of the little things around you and more motivated to make the most of every day. As you navigate life after cancer, you may face emotional, physical, and mental challenges that are often best understood by others who have experienced cancer firsthand.

Life for survivors is different than it was before cancer. It's common for survivors to be concerned about cancer recurrence, financial issues, long-term physical and emotional effects, among other concerns. There are many resources that address these worries, and cancer survivor support groups are safe spaces to share the good, the bad, the humorous, and the ugly with others who have walked in your shoes and truly understand.

Cancer Survivors Are Not Alone

Every experience in your life shapes who you are and cancer is no exception. Your experiences can help others and give encouragement and give yourself the courage to share your thoughts and concerns with those who are most likely to understand.

Whether you have survived breast cancer, prostate cancer, skin cancer, leukemia, or any other type of cancer, you will find cancer-specific support groups whose members are intimately familiar with your journey. There are support groups specific to cancer survivors of all ages and stages of life -- from young children and their parents to senior citizens and every demographic group in between.

Even if your circle of loved ones and close friends is extensive, you may sometimes feel alone even in the midst of supportive, loving people. When you have survived cancer, you have experienced symptoms, situations, and emotions that only other cancer survivors understand. Cancer support groups are safe, welcoming spaces where you can share thoughts and feelings you may not feel comfortable sharing with your closest friends and loved ones. Even if you are not yet ready to share your own feelings, it can be helpful simply listening to others speak about their feelings. While every survivor's journey is unique, many of the emotions, questions, and experiences that arise after treatment are shared by others navigating life after cancer.

Benefits of Cancer Support Groups

Other benefits of participating in a local cancer support group include:

- Receiving assistance with lingering cancer treatment side effects.
- Receiving advice about practical issues involving returning to work or school after cancer.
- Enjoying the ability to talk openly about your emotions, fears, and feelings.

When you are ready to reach out, you'll discover there are many communities willing to embrace you!

Online Cancer Survivor Resources

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship | The Cancer Survival Toolbox

This is a free audio program from the National Coalition on Cancer Survivorship. It's designed to help cancer survivors and caregivers develop practical skills to deal with the diagnosis, treatment, and challenges of cancer.

Cancer.net | Doctor-Approved Survivorship Information from ASCO

American Society of Clinical Oncologists patient site

CancerCare | Educational Workshops

Connect® Education Workshops. Upcoming Telephone Education Workshops available free.

LIVESTRONG | Cancer and Fertility Risks for Women

When facing cancer, survival is most important. However, you should know that the treatments used to fight your cancer may affect your ability to have children. This section includes general information about cancer-related fertility risks.

National Cancer Institute | Coping with Cancer Survivorship

Survivorship - Living with and Beyond Cancer from National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health.

OncoLink | Survivorship Care Plan

OncoLink has decided to focus on a “survivorship care plan” detailing the medical consequences a survivor may face. This document will be individualized based on the answers you provide in a brief questionnaire.

American Cancer Society | Volunteer to Save Lives

Visit the American Cancer Society website to learn more about opportunities to volunteer and share your cancer survivorship journey.



Follow-Up Care for Cancer Survivors

After you were diagnosed with cancer, you began a new journey that extends beyond the cancer treatment phase. It's a new lifelong process of caring for yourself in a new way.

Early in the cancer survivor journey you had to learn for yourself what normal would look like, and share that with your loved ones. The middle of that journey involved undergoing cancer treatment and dealing with the physical and emotional side effects of it.

Now that you've come through treatment, you have the rest of your life ahead of you. You may even experience a sort of "honeymoon phase" that allows your life to be filled with more activities you choose rather than physician appointments. You're probably feeling like you're ready to "move on."

While that's good, it's also really 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

Fortunately, most survivors receive a follow-up cancer plan that may include the following: treatment history, treatment team, recommendations 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 the following questions.

- How long will it take until I feel more like myself?
- Which doctor(s) should I see for my follow-up care?
- How often should I see my doctor(s) for follow-up care?
- What symptoms should I watch out for and consider red flags?
- Are there any long-term health issues I should expect after my cancer treatment?
- What records should I keep about my treatment?
- What specific things can I do to take care of myself to remain as healthy as possible?

If your cancer follow-up plan doesn't address these or other questions that you may have, make sure to ask your cancer care team.

Step 2: Make and Attend Your Cancer Follow-up Appointments

Every cancer patient is different and follow-up instructions vary accordingly. In general, the frequency of recommended follow-up appointments will depend on the type of cancer you had, the way 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. It's very important to make and keep your follow-up appointments. There is a risk of cancer recurrence. Catching it at a regular follow-up appointment can help with treating it quickly and more effectively.

Regarding Cancer Recurrence

There is no foolproof way to absolutely prevent cancer recurrence. However, according to the American Cancer Society, there are certain actions you can take to be as healthy as possible.

- Eat at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits each day
- Limit red meat (beef, pork, lamb) and processed meats (hot dogs, sausage, lunch meats, etc.)
- Consume foods made with whole grains rather than refined grains and sugars
- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Limit alcohol intake to one (women) or two (men) drinks per day
- Participate in regular physical activity
- 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

It's also important to note signs of cancer recurrence, such as:

- Return of your original cancer symptoms
- New or unusual pain that doesn't go away
- Unexplained weight loss
- Easy bleeding or bruising
- New skin lesion or change such as an abnormal rash, etc.
- Chills or fever
- Shortness of breath
- Blood in your stool or urine
- Frequent headaches
- Unexplained lumps, bumps, or swelling
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, appetite loss, or trouble swallowing
- Persistent cough
- Any unusual symptoms that concern you

Step 3: Seek Support from Other Cancer Survivors

Once you've battled cancer, it's understandable that you may experience more anxiety about your health than other people who have never had a serious disease. Being diligent about attending your follow-up oncology appointments can go a long way in relieving some of the worries. But it's also helpful to get some support between doctor visits. A support group for survivors is a great way to get that.

Cancer survivors' support groups allow you to 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. Virginia Oncology Associates hosts numerous survivors' support groups and events year-round at its nine locations.



Keeping Your Personal Health Records

When you were being treated for cancer, visiting your medical providers weekly (sometimes even more often than that) was a routine part of your life. Now that you're cancer-free, you may still need to visit your medical providers more frequently than other people who have never had a serious illness. Every time you leave the medical provider's office, you leave with paperwork. You may wonder what you need to keep, why and for how long. Let's take a closer look at the documents that make up your personal health records.

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. It describes all of the cancer treatment you received, including surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, etc. This summary 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.

Your treatment summary should **include** all pertinent information that could affect your health in the future.

Your cancer treatment summary is very important!

It should be shared with your primary care physician, and any other medical providers you see in the future. . The treatment summary ensures that you have easy access to your pertinent medical records when you need them. Without it, you would have to track down individual records yourself, which might be difficult or even impossible.

It's possible that some of the information on the sheet includes medical terms that you may not understand, but that's OK. It can provide great insight for a physician in the future who may need to provide care for cancer or for another condition.

Other Important Medical Records to Keep

Other important medical records to hold onto include:

- Treatment plans for existing health conditions
- Records of past appointments (noting which doctor you saw on which date)
- Immunization records
- Hospital bills
- Mammogram reports and other imaging tests
- Records detailing other past major illnesses
- Current medications and medication histories (including information about allergies or adverse reactions to medications)

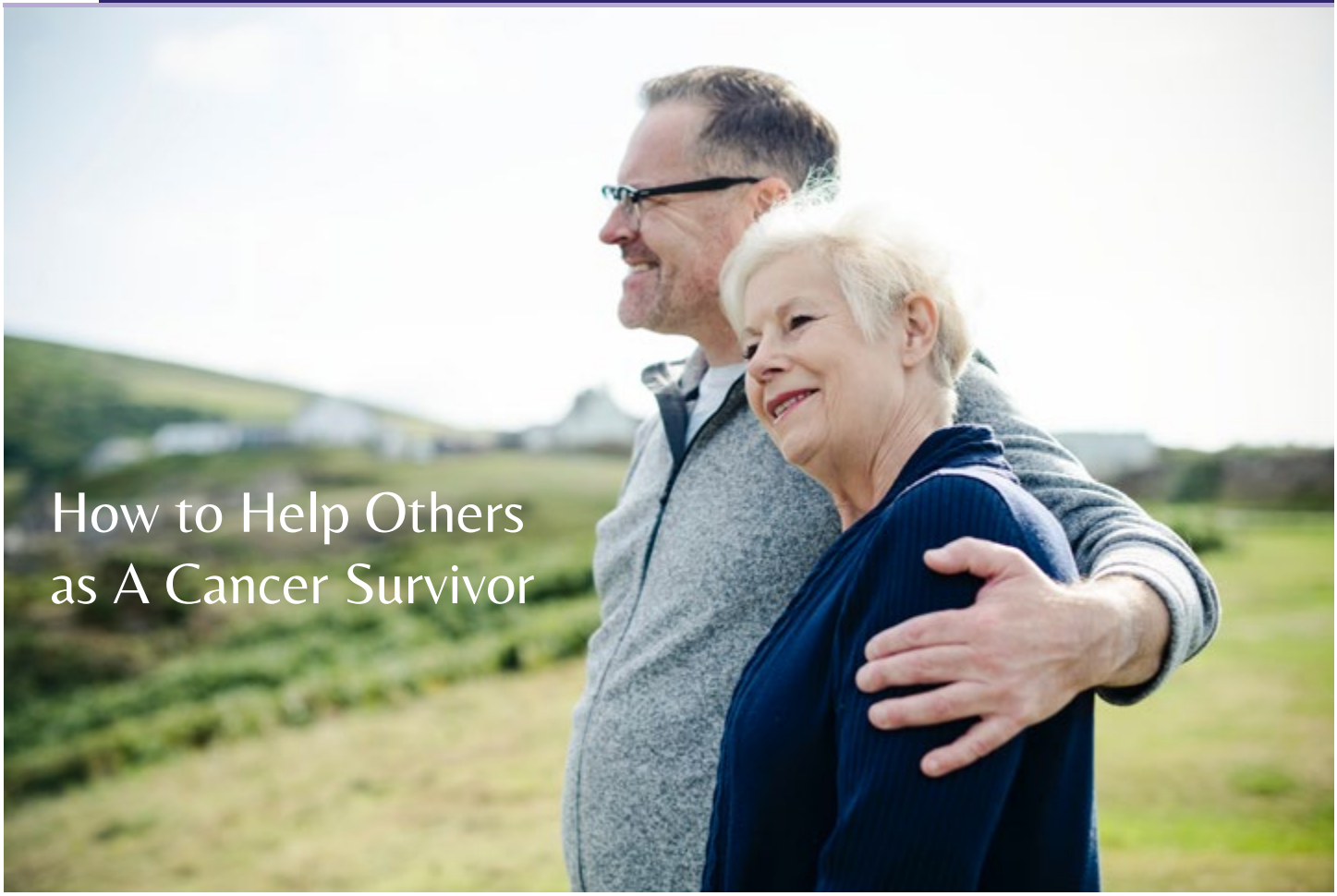
It's critical to keep copies of your important medical records because physicians are only required to keep them for a limited period of time (which varies from state to state). Even when patients need records their doctors do still have, they face significant fees and challenges accessing them, notes a 2018 report to Congress by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Keeping Track of Your Health Records

While most healthcare providers keep electronic medical records (EMRs) on each of their patients, it's smart to keep track of your own records, too, rather than rely on your providers to do so. EMRs are only as comprehensive and accurate as the data that someone is entering into them. Providers are not perfect. They're often in a rush. It's entirely possible that pertinent information can inadvertently be left out.

If you go online, you'll find many software "apps" available to help you organize your medical records. Whether you want to keep track digitally using your smartphone, personal computer, or tablet, you'll find many options from which to choose. **This article mentions 10 apps you can look into for starters**. The technology definitely exists. Why not use it?

We all know that computers crash and phones get stolen. If you haven't already, request paper copies of all your important health records (especially records related to your cancer treatment). Laminate the pages or place them in plastic sleeves to protect them, punch holes in them, secure them in a binder, keep the binder in a safe and easily accessible place, and bring the binder with you each time you're meeting with a new medical provider.



How to Help Others as A Cancer Survivor

Think about the hours and days after you were diagnosed with cancer. You probably felt a range of emotions including shock, disbelief, and fear. You may have felt alone despite being surrounded by caring friends and loved ones who were anxious to help. Even though they had good intentions, it may have been difficult for friends and loved ones to understand how you were feeling unless they had experienced a cancer diagnosis. As a survivor you are uniquely qualified to help other cancer patients.

Volunteering: A Gift to Others And to Yourself

Even the most independent people need help getting through cancer treatment. You received a selfless gift every time you were able to rely on someone during your cancer journey. Your journey is now behind you and you can pay that kindness forward by helping others.

Helping others is a win-win. Volunteers benefit as much as recipients. When you were being treated for cancer, you may have stopped working. You may have needed to rely on babysitters, housekeepers, friends, and family to take over some things you used to be responsible for but could not keep up with during treatment. This may have caused you to doubt yourself and question your abilities. Helping others who are going through a similar situation may help decrease their fear and help you regain your confidence as well. You have so much to offer!

There are Many Ways for Cancer Survivors to Help Cancer Patients

Whether you are a “people person” or you prefer to help out behind the scenes, you’re sure to discover volunteering, or giving opportunities, you find appealing. You can:



- Help out one-on-one providing aid to patients and their families.
- Volunteer your time and talents at one of the many nonprofit organizations that exist to raise money for cancer research or patient care.
- Attend a support group to help patients.
- Participate in some of the online Facebook groups on support programs for those who aren’t able to get out.

If you’re willing to donate some of your time to help others, you are definitely needed! Start your research by reading through this section about helping others and visiting the American Cancer Society website.

Making A Difference to Another Cancer Patient



Ways Cancer Survivors Can Help Patients

Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, there are things you can do to brighten the lives of people being treated for cancer. As is the case with many volunteer opportunities, you can serve in a variety of ways. There are programs you can join that allow you to offer one-on-one assistance to a cancer patient directly. Or you can be a part of a support group that helps patients. If talking to others about cancer treatment and survivorship isn't in your comfort-zone, you can volunteer in more of a behind-the-scenes or administrative role. Opportunities abound. The first step is to decide how much time you're able to devote and whether you want to work directly with patients or in a supportive role.

If you'd like to work directly with cancer patients, 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.
- Help patients being treated for the cancer you experienced understand what to expect. Every patient's experience is different, but hearing about your personal treatment journey will provide valuable insight.
- Accompany patients into their doctor appointments to be a notetaker.
- 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 masseuse? Cosmetologist? Home improvement contractor? Financial planner? You may have skills that can help patients feel better physically or address things they aren't able to due to cancer.

If you'd like to help cancer patients in more of a behind-the-scenes 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 to help with administrative tasks at a local cancer charity.
- Volunteering at a cancer-information hotline.

How to Find an Opportunity to Volunteer

If you're interested in volunteering to help cancer patients, there are several ways to get started. If you know someone who is being treated for cancer, you can simply reach out and offer your assistance. Sometimes, people are reluctant to accept help even when they desperately want to! If you're offering support to an individual, 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.).

If you'd like to be matched with a patient in need of support, the following programs can help you:

- **Imerman Angels** will screen you, match with a cancer patient in need of support, and provide training.
- **American Cancer Society**, **ACS CARES®**, **Colorectal Cancer Alliance Buddy Program**, and **Lung Cancer Alliance Phone Buddy Program** match survivors of breast cancer, colorectal cancer, and lung cancer, respectively, with patients being treated for these diseases.
- **Other cancer survivorship resources** for Virginia Oncology Associates cancer patients and/or survivors.

Volunteering is a win-win; it helps ease cancer patients' physical and emotional burdens and it will probably lift your spirits to know you've had a positive impact on someone during a difficult time in their life. You're a survivor. Your experiences uniquely qualify you to help cancer patients during their time of need.

Can I Donate My Organs After Cancer?

As a cancer survivor, it's probably safe to assume that during your journey you've developed a true appreciation of life. You know firsthand what it feels like to receive a serious diagnosis, the uncertainties of living with cancer, and the feelings of joy, relief, and gratitude when you beat it. Thanks to your unique life experiences, you may feel compelled to sign up as an organ donor so you can give the gift of life to someone else.



There is a Huge Need for Organ Donors

According to Donate Life Virginia, while 95% of Americans support the idea of being an organ donor, only 40% of Virginia adults are not yet registered as organ donors.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), more than 140,000 people were on the waiting list for a kidney transplant as of 2023.

As of December 9, 2025, 22 patients die per day awaiting a transplant per Health Resources and Services Administration(HRSA) and the Organ Procurement & Transplantation Network (OPTN).

Will A Cancer Survivor Qualify as an Organ Donor?

As a cancer survivor, you may wonder if you are eligible to donate your organs to help those on the organ donor waiting list. The answer depends on the type of cancer you had and any existing medical conditions you have after treatment is complete.

UNOS does not recommend accepting donor organs from people with actively spreading cancer. Additionally, while very rare, there have been reports of cancer survivors who were

believed to be cancer free unknowingly transmitting cancer to an organ recipient. The bottom line? Each individual agency responsible for procuring donor organs, and intended organ recipients, decides on a case-by-case basis whether or not to accept donor organs for transplant.

Organ Donation to Benefit Humanity: Everyone is Eligible!

At any given time, there are thousands of people waiting for organ transplants – and millions of people waiting for a medical breakthrough to treat or cure a devastating illness. If organ donation for transplantation isn't recommended in your situation, donating your organ for medical research is another great option.

The benefits of donating tissues and organs for medical research are equally (perhaps even more) tangible. And, anyone can donate their organs (even if they're not suitable for transplant) for medical research. According to the International Institute for the Advancement of Medicine, examples of current research being conducted using donated tissues and organs include:

- Studying human lung tissues to develop new drugs to treat life threatening asthma, cystic fibrosis, and COPD.
- Studying non-transplantable pancreas tissues to develop treatments for Type 1 diabetes.
- Studying normal and diseased hearts and using the data to help create devices to remove coronary plaque, which is a leading cause of fatal heart disease.

Additionally, almost anyone who has or had cancer (with the exception of certain blood or eye cancers) can safely donate their corneas for transplantation.

There's no doubt that organ donation saves lives. Donor organs transplanted into gravely ill individuals and donor organs used to conduct important scientific research both create a ripple effect of good. If you are a cancer survivor, you absolutely can donate your organs, whether for transplant or research, and feel proud that you're providing highly needed assistance to others. If you are in Virginia, you can find more information about registering as an organ donor at Donate Life Virginia.

Four Ways You Can Show Support for the Cancer Survivors in Your Life

Just about everyone knows at least one cancer survivor. In fact, there's a good chance that you're a survivor! Recent statistics show that there's an increase in the number of cancer survivors as we progress with more advanced cancer treatments and technologies. And that's good news! But when it comes down to it, each cancer survivor has their own experiences and feelings that they need to manage. These feelings may be somewhat different as they are transitioning out of cancer treatment compared to a few years down the road. But the fact remains that cancer has changed their lives forever and will always affect how they think and act.

Whether the survivor just finished treatment or their cancer was treated many years ago, one commonality among cancer survivors is that they will continue to need the support of their loved ones.

Here are four ways you can continue to show support for the cancer survivor in your life:



1. Celebrate their Cancerversary®

What is a cancerversary®? Cancerversaries are a celebration of living with, through, and beyond cancer. This important milestone is different for everyone. Some cancer survivors consider their cancerversary to be their last day of treatment. For others, it might be another important occurrence during their cancer journey.

Even if you don't know the specific date, consider planning a celebratory event around the time they became cancer-free. Gather the family and friends for a dinner at home, a park or a restaurant. A family vacation or romantic getaway are also wonderful ways to celebrate. The main goal is to do things your cancer survivor wasn't able to do while undergoing treatment. It can be fun to ask them about a list of things they've always wanted to do and choose something from that list to do as part of the cancerversary celebration.

2. Get Involved to Raise Awareness

For those who feel they'd like to "give back", you may want to get involved with national or local cancer organizations that help raise both funds and awareness. There are several to choose from, including well-known ones such as American Cancer Society, Susan G. Komen, and LIVESTRONG, that aid in cancer research, work to spread awareness, and help patients and their families live their best lives.

You and your cancer survivor along with friends and family can attend an event, create a personalized fundraising page, or volunteer. No matter what you choose, you'll be actively supporting your cancer survivor as well as other survivors in the cancer community.

3. Celebrate National Cancer Survivors Day®

National Cancer Survivors Day® (NCSD) is an annual celebration of life that is recognized both nationally and internationally on the first Sunday in June. According to the NCSD website, it is a day that provides cancer survivors with an opportunity to "connect with each other, celebrate milestones, and recognize those who have supported them along the way." You can learn more about hosting or attending an NCSD event by **visiting their website**.

4. Show You Care and Just Be There

For many cancer survivors fatigue, or feeling tired quickly, is a common lasting side effect of cancer treatment that means your survivor may need more rest than they used to or can't get as much done in a day as they'd like. In those early months after treatment, you might consider offering to run errands, drive them to follow-up visits, or help out with projects around the house. Your help can make it possible to get things done. While he or she won't always need your help, they'll appreciate knowing that they can count on you if they do.

And even if you're not located close to them, you can show other gestures or offer caring words to show your support. Phone calls, texts, cards, meals (delivered by you or a delivery service), and friendly visits or Facetime calls are a few ways that can let them know you care.

Our cancer specialists at Virginia Oncology Associates understand that life after cancer can be concerning. That's why they've put together some cancer survivor resources to help you address some of your worries, visit our **Cancer Survivorship & Resources** webpage for more information.