

# What should I expect after a cancer diagnosis?



Following a cancer diagnosis, it is important to be kind to yourself as you slowly find your new 'normal'. The experience can be long and challenging, so it is important to be patient to ensure the transition is made as easy as possible.

Psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors specialise in helping patients manage their mental health and support a holistic health approach following a cancer diagnosis.

The **Inherited Cancers Australia** community is made up of people from all over Australia who have experienced cancer either personally or in their family, and come together to provide support.

## Cancer survivorship

To improve your cancer survivorship and overall health:

- **Take care of yourself emotionally** – Seek support, speak to friends, be kind to yourself
- **Eat a balanced diet** – Good nutrition supports overall health.
- **Maintain a balanced weight** – Research suggests that a healthy weight through a healthy diet and exercise lowers your risk of developing diabetes, blood pressure and other cancers and chronic disease
- **Stick with your follow-up care and screenings** – While your routine oncology appointment may seem redundant, it is important to continue with your regular screenings such as pap tests, blood tests and scans to manage any potential risk and catch any changes early
- **Take your prescribed medications** – If you are given a full course of hormone therapy, such as Tamoxifen, these medications are designed specifically to help reduce the risk of recurrence and are therefore incredibly important to keep up with.



## Changes to your body

Treatment and surgery for cancer can result in changes to your body. These changes are very individual, and not everyone experiences them. Some of the changes, along with resources that can help support you if you experience them.

- **Weight gain** – For some people, weight gain can be an upsetting change to their body. The symptoms of menopause and side effects of hormone therapy can make losing weight and exercising harder than before your diagnosis. Just as your diagnosis and treatment pathway is personal to you, so too is how you want to look and feel after treatment.
  - Crash dieting and cutting out food groups can mean that you aren't getting all the nutrition you need to support your health and can contribute to things like fatigue meaning you don't feel like exercising. There are also a lot of myths about 'good' and 'bad' foods after a cancer diagnosis. Speak to a professional and be sure to get evidence-based advice on how to healthily manage your weight
- **Lymphoedema** – This is when lymph fluid builds up in tissue. There's a risk of lymphoedema in the arm following axilla lymph node dissection or after radiotherapy to the axilla/armpit. There's also a risk of lymphoedema in the breast after surgery. It can also occur in the legs after the removal of lymph nodes from the pelvis. Lymphoedema can happen many years after treatment or surgery and is incurable once it's developed, although it can be managed. Prevention is therefore important and there are many steps you can take to reduce your risk.
  - This doesn't happen to everyone, but it is important that you are aware of the signs, which can include a feeling of 'heaviness' or swelling. Speak to your care team about what to look out for
- **Cording** – Axillary web syndrome, or cording, may happen after breast surgery, particularly if it involves sentinel lymph node biopsy or axillary lymph node dissection. A tightness can develop in the armpit and along the inside of the arm that often feels or looks like a 'cord'. This can extend into your hand or along the ribs. Cording can be painful but can be resolved. It's important to continue to move, and gently stretch. See an experienced physiotherapist or lymphoedema therapist. They can give you some range of movement exercises and may be able to help release the cording with massage or low-level laser therapy
- **Joint aches or pains** – Whether from initial treatment, surgery, ongoing medication or menopause (or all of these), joint aches and pains are a side effect that many people aren't prepared for. The mantra 'movement is medicine' may be true, but pushing through or ignoring pain can cause more problems.



- Talk to someone who's appropriately qualified and experienced, like an accredited exercise physiologist. If you don't have one in your area, many do telehealth. There are other allied health professionals that can help too, including physiotherapists, acupuncturists or oncology masseurs. That's not to say you need to see them all. Find what's right for you. Some allied health costs can be subsidised as part of a Chronic Disease Management Plan – talk to your GP to see if this is available to you.
- **Dry/fragile vagina** – Menopause, whether natural or induced by treatment for breast or ovarian cancer, can result in the skin of the vagina and vulva getting thinner and drier. This is known as vaginal atrophy, or more recently genitourinary syndrome of menopause. It means sex can be painful and can increase your risk of UTIs (as well as your need to pee). Hormonal treatments are available, but this must be discussed with your doctor as it may not be appropriate for you
  - Lubes, moisturisers and dilators can help. Try to avoid irritation: wear undies made of natural fibres and use products that don't contain irritants like perfumes or powders. Sexual arousal can also help keep the vagina and vulva healthy as it increases blood flow but take care not to hurt yourself or cause pain and use plenty of lube
- **Fertility** – Some treatments for breast cancer can affect fertility, either temporarily or permanently. There's a lot to consider and it's important that you have a conversation with your oncology specialist about how treatment may impact your fertility and reproductive health
- **Bone density** – Bone density can be reduced by some breast cancer treatments, such as hormone therapy, or early menopause induced by treatment or surgery. This can increase your risk of bone fractures and osteoporosis.
  - Weight-bearing exercises can help maintain bone density, and an accredited exercise physiologist will be able to put together a personalised program for you. Eat a diet that includes foods with a high calcium content and ensure you're getting adequate vitamin D. You can have your bone density checked with a DXA or DEXA test. If you are concerned about your vitamin D levels, speak to your GP or a qualified dietician.