



The End of Treatment

After active treatment is complete, you will begin a plan for follow-up care. This will involve less frequent visits to the oncology team, which for many can be a very scary time. The weekly or monthly visits to the oncologist are reassuring; someone is checking on things and giving you the thumbs up. Survivors are often surprised by their emotional reaction at this time. They anticipate jumping for joy and throwing survival parties, and instead find themselves crying in the parking lot after their last treatment, feeling vulnerable in unexpected ways. Some find it disconcerting that they are no longer receiving active treatment to attack rogue cancer cells; furthermore, their treatment team is no longer giving them much needed daily or weekly support. Early cancer survivors can feel fear, sadness, anger, isolation, and grief. These feelings can co-exist with a sense of relief, gratitude, and an enhanced sense of capacity to face adversity.

Completion of therapy is a time when friends and family may say, "Congratulations" and "You must be glad to be done", though you may be feeling uncertain about this milestone. Friends, family and even the oncology team can be caught off guard by the complicated emotions you are experiencing. They may not realize that these emotions are common and even expected, which may make you feel even more isolated. You aren't alone. These are common reactions and here are a few tips to help you deal with it.

For starters, be assured that your oncology team is always there if concerns arise. Protocols for follow-up care have been developed to follow each person in the best way. This plan varies for every type of cancer and may involve periodic blood work, radiology scans and tests, and physical exams. You may only see the oncology team once or twice a year, but they are always a phone call away.

Finding Your New Normal

Friends and family will say it must be nice to be getting back to normal. But as any cancer survivor will tell you, things have changed, and so has the definition of "normal". Many survivors say they look at life differently: they don't take things for granted and don't sweat the small stuff. A cancer diagnosis changes you as a person, something people around you may not fully understand. It may be helpful to join a group of survivors, either formally (in a support group) or informally (gather a few folks you have met along the way). Email and the Internet have created wonderful support for all sorts of concerns, and survivorship is no different. [CancerCare](#) provides support groups and professional counseling over the phone or online. Many cancer centers and advocacy organizations offer support groups for survivors to address their specific concerns after therapy. A "buddy" program can match you with someone who's been in your shoes and can be a listening ear and support person – or you can become a buddy to someone else. No one understands this time better than someone who has been there, and this support can be very valuable. Buddy programs are offered by [Imerman Angels](#), [Cancer Hope Network](#), and many other disease-specific advocacy groups.

Cancer survivors face daunting tasks: finding meaning in illness, restoring a sense of identity and purpose, and coping with uncertainty. How one begins to meet these challenges is unique to each survivor. For some, recovery from the trauma of cancer and its treatment can be made more difficult by the late medical complications of treatment, which can affect quality of life. Remind yourself of the strength you demonstrated in having met the challenges of cancer treatment. Setting new goals and turning to spirituality are possible strategies for coping. Using artistic expressions such as painting and writing can be helpful tools to work through your emotions. When emotions become too overwhelming, it may be helpful to seek a referral to a mental health professional. Signs of persistent depression and anxiety include interference with sleep and daytime function, hopelessness, and suicidal thinking and are indicators that professional help is needed. Ask your care team to recommend a psychological professional (counselor, therapist, social worker) with experience working with people with cancer. If you are thinking about hurting yourself or having suicidal thoughts call the [National Suicide Prevention Hotline](#) at 1-800-273-8255 or 911.

Completing treatment can also present other challenges. Your family or employer may expect things to pick up where they left off. Resuming your previous activities may not be as easy as it sounds. Many survivors suffer from fatigue or limited energy for months, or even years, after therapy. The time it takes to get over this fatigue varies greatly depending on the treatment received, the type of cancer, how fatigue affected you during treatment, and how well you can balance the demands on your time. Some people describe their energy as a bowl of candy. You start the morning with a full bowl, and every task takes one or two candies. You will need to continue to balance and prioritize your time and energy. Save a few candies for when you have something special to do in the evening. You will find that your bowl of candy will continue to get bigger every day. Using this metaphor will help you mentally manage your time and energy.

The issues we have discussed thus far will generally resolve, or at least improve, in the months following treatment. But there are many issues that can affect survivors in the long term, including health issues related to treatment, as well as financial (employment and insurance) and personal (fertility, sexuality, and relationship) issues.

Long Term and Late Effects of Cancer Treatment

While many patients are told about the long-term health effects of treatment before starting, they often don't recall or didn't concern themselves with them at that time. This is understandable, because when you're presented with treatment options to save your life, thinking about what could happen ten or twenty years down the road isn't as much of a priority. So what to do now? Learn what your risks are based on the treatment you received, learn what you can do to prevent them, if possible, and learn how to monitor for them. Take the first step and develop an [OncoLife Survivorship Care Plan](#). Some survivors may also benefit from a visit to a survivorship clinic. These clinics review your treatment history and develop recommendations for you and your primary care team based on your personal risks. Contact cancer centers in your area to see if they have a survivor's clinic or [search for a clinic on OncoLink's survivorship clinic list](#) (though this list is not exhaustive).

Resources for Practical Support

There are many resources to help survivors, but it can take some homework to find what you need. In dealing with employment, disability and insurance issues, you should learn about your rights and your employer's responsibilities under the law. OncoLink's [section on financial and insurance issues](#) or our educational tip [sheets](#) may be helpful. The [Patient Advocate Foundation](#) and the [American Cancer Society](#) websites have financial and insurance information for survivors. [The Cancer Legal Resource Center](#) and [Triage Cancer](#) provide information on cancer-related legal issues, including insurance coverage, employment and time off, and healthcare and government benefits. [Cancer and Careers](#) is a resource for all things employment-related, from time of diagnosis well into survivorship.

Personal issues related to sexuality or fertility can be emotionally draining, and can interfere with personal relationships at a time when you need them most. OncoLink's [section on fertility & sexuality](#) may be helpful. Organizations such as the [Oncofertility Consortium](#) and [Resolve](#) can help with fertility issues. [Us Too](#) and the [American Cancer Society](#) provide fertility and sexuality resources.

How cancer affects your sexual health is different for every survivor. Some find the support they need through their healthcare team, their partner, friends or fellow survivors. Some cancer advocacy groups host discussion boards where you can "talk" about concerns with someone who has been there. The [American Cancer Society](#) offers sexuality information for men and women. For those that find things more difficult, a mental health provider can help you cope with the physical and emotional trauma cancer brings and determine how to move forward, whether with a partner or looking for one. Look for a therapist with expertise in working with people with cancer and/or sexual health and relationship issues.

All of this can be a bit overwhelming, but the fact that there are over 17 million cancer survivors in the United States today is a testament to the fact that you can do this! Take it one day at a time, and seek the support you need to live and love your "new normal" life.

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