

Life after breast cancer

Despite the relief of knowing you survived cancer, reaching the end cancer treatment can be a difficult time for many women. There can be a feeling of “what now”? Especially as there previous period of your life was dominated with hospital appointments, surgery and the routine around chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment. Many people find they miss the security of regular hospital checks and the support from the cancer care staff. Most women find that it takes longer than they expect to make a full recovery after treatment.

The consultant, cancer care nurses from the hospital and your GP can help you with a plan for follow up care. This should include regular physical examinations and/or medical tests to monitor your recovery for the following months and years after treatment. Recommendations include regular physical examinations, blood tests and mammograms. Breast cancer can return in the breast or other parts of the body and those who have had previous cancer are at more risk of developing cancer. Symptoms of cancer recurrence to be vigilant for include a new lump in the breast, under the arms, or along the chest wall; bone pain, bone fractures; headaches, seizures; chronic coughing or breathing issues; severe fatigue; and nausea or vomiting. There is a lifetime risk of reoccurrence after the first episode of breast cancer. Even if the breast cancer was 20 years ago, you are still at increased risk of reoccurrence; therefore regular screenings in the years following cancer are important. It is natural to be worried about cancer returning, however by getting regular check-ups, your risk of cancer reoccurrence goes down.

Surgery (mastectomy or lumpectomy) is one of the main treatment techniques used for breast cancer. The surgery can leave the breast scarred and a different shape and size than prior to surgery. A mastectomy scar is across the front of the chest and into the armpit. A scar in the armpit should not be noticeable from the front. Initially the scar will be red or darker if your skin is a darker tone. It can feel quite firm and may be slightly raised. With time it will flatten and fade. For women with dark skin or fair or freckled skin, the scars can take longer to settle down. Always contact your surgery team if you have worries about how the scar is healing.

Late effects of surgery

Some women experience an uncomfortable sensation many describe as feeling like a tight cord running from the armpit to the back of their hand. This sensation is known as cording. It can develop weeks or months after surgery and is due to hardened lymph vessels. In more severe cases it makes it difficult to move the arm; however it gradually improves over a few months. Physiotherapy and massage may be required to improve it in some cases. If lymph nodes removed as part of the surgery or damaged during chemotherapy/radiation, lymphedema (swelling of the hand and arm) may occur, even years after treatment. There is an increased risk of this for the rest of your life.

Late effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy

Some women experience dry cough, breathlessness, and chest pain first few months after completing radiation therapy (usually for the first three months) because radiation therapy can cause swelling and fibrosis (thickening and hardening) in the lungs. These symptoms ease with time. Post cancer fatigue is common.

Women who had a chemotherapy drug called trastuzumab or a type of chemotherapy called anthracyclines have an increased risk of developing heart problems so heart checks are important after surgery for these women. Women who have had a form of breast cancer that is called “oestrogen receptor positive” breast cancer are often prescribed anti-oestrogen drugs such as tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors such as anastrozole or letrozole in the years after the initial cancer treatment as they reduce risk of the cancer returning. Women taking tamoxifen should undergo annual pelvic exams as tamoxifen can increase the risk of developing uterine cancer. It

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is important for women prescribed tamoxifen to be vigilant for signs of uterine cancer including abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, pelvic pain or pressure or other new symptoms. Women who are taking an aromatase inhibitor, such as anastrozole (Arimidex[®]), or letrozole (Femara[®]), should have a bone density check before starting the drug and then on a regular basis from then on, as they can cause osteoporosis as they can reduce bone density.

Women recovering from breast cancer can have other side effects that can continue even after treatment. These can be the after effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Symptoms can include nerve pain (neuropathy), menopausal symptoms (eg. low mood), vaginal dryness, reduced libido (sex drive). Medication may be prescribed for some of these symptoms. For example, drugs can help relieve neuropathy pain (eg. gabapentin (Neurontin[®]), pregabalin (Lyrica[®])), antidepressants may be required temporarily for menopausal symptoms and painkillers may be required for joint pain.

Healthy diet

Women recovering from breast cancer should eat a healthy diet, not smoke, limit alcohol and attend recommended cancer screening appointments. Moderate exercise can help rebuild strength and energy levels and lowers the risk of cancer returning. A healthy balanced diet and avoiding excessive weight gain is associated with a better breast cancer survival rates. A healthy diet should include eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and foods rich in fibre and starch. Avoid eating too much fatty food, sugary food and drinks and only drink alcohol in moderation. Omega 3 fatty acids found in oily fish are also beneficial.

Should I exercise?

Most women feel tired for a number of weeks or months after breast cancer treatment. After treatment you should try to gradually increase daily activity with the aim of building at least three (more if possible) twenty minute sessions of moderate activity per week. The main aim is to get your heart rate up. Exercise can also improve mood and sleep, reduce stress, control weight gain, boost self-esteem, and protect against other diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. Your doctor or physiotherapist can help plan an exercise regime.

When to return to work

Some women find that they can work throughout their chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment, whilst others require a recovery period of several months after the end of treatment before being ready to return to their job. Returning to work is a big shock to the system to begin with and it can be very useful to return in a “phased” manner, increasing your working hours over a few weeks. However returning to routine and normality can help the recovery process.

Prosthesis and bra fitting in Westmeath

Some women who choose a mastectomy (removal of the breast) decide on reconstructive surgery after a mastectomy, but many choose breast prosthesis. Many women do not realise their full entitlements in relation to prostheses and fitting. All women in Ireland who have undergone breast cancer surgery are entitled to their first prosthesis and two bras free of charge. Medical Card holders are entitled to further free prosthesis and bra fitting. Many Health Insurance policies have entitlements for prosthesis and bra fitting. LARCC is the local provider of prostheses and bra fitting after breast surgery and they provide a special fitting service in Multyfarnham and have recently extended this service to Mullingar by offering a monthly clinic in Whelehan's pharmacy in Mullingar. Call LARCC at 1890 719 719 for more information and to find out your entitlements.

Disclaimer: Information given is general only; Consult with LARCC or your healthcare professional for more information For specific advice and information on breast prosthesis and bra fitting post breast surgery, contact LARCC at 1890 719 719 or Whelehan's Pharmacy at 04493 34591