

Once breast cancer treatment ends, most side effects go away over time. Yet, you might have some side effects that could occur months or even years after treatment ends.

If you know what to expect, it may help you prepare. While some of the side effects listed below can't be reversed, most symptoms can be treated.

If you're concerned about a symptom (especially if it lasts for more than 2 weeks), call your doctor.

Side effects (in alphabetical order)

Changes in the breast

The look and feel of your breast/chest area may continue to change during the first 1-2 years after surgery. If you had a lumpectomy, there will be some scarring, numbness and changes in the shape of your breast. If you had a mastectomy, you will be numb across your chest. You may or may not get the feeling back. If you do, it will not be like it was before surgery.

If you had radiation therapy, you may notice firmness or shrinkage of the breast or skin. Your skin may look tan and the skin around the surgical scar may be red in color.

Cognitive function (“chemo brain” or “cancer brain”)

Some people have cognitive problems after breast cancer treatment. Symptoms include mental “fuzziness” and/or trouble with concentration, memory and multi-tasking. Stress, anxiety and depression can also affect cognitive function. Talk with your doctor if your symptoms are affecting your way of life. Most people say these symptoms go away over time. Talk with your doctor to rule out depression or side effects from medicines.

Fatigue and insomnia

Fatigue and insomnia (sleeping problems) are common. Exercise (even just walking every day) can help with fatigue after breast cancer treatment.



Fear and emotional distress

You may become aware of every ache and pain in your body. Each pain brings with it the fear the cancer has returned. This is normal. It should ease with time. Support from family and friends may help ease your fear. If fear starts to disrupt your daily life, call your doctor.

Infertility

Both chemotherapy and tamoxifen can cause irregular periods or can stop periods for good. Both tend to bring on menopause early. If you wish to have a child, talk with your doctor about your fertility options before treatment begins.

SIDE EFFECTS AFTER BREAST CANCER TREATMENT ENDS

Related fact sheets in this series:

- [Follow-Up Medical Care After Breast Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Support After A Breast Cancer Diagnosis](#)

Loss of bone density

Aromatase inhibitors cause a loss of bone density. This increases the risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures (breaks). If you're taking an aromatase inhibitor, your doctor should take a baseline measure of your bone density to watch for changes.

Lymphedema

If you had lymph nodes in the underarm area removed (or treated with radiation therapy), you are at risk of lymphedema. Lymphedema occurs when lymph fluid collects in the arm (or other area such as the hand or chest/breast) causing it to swell. It often occurs within 3 years of breast surgery but can occur years later. Ask your doctor about symptoms to watch for and tips to reduce the risk of infection or injury to the arm.

Menopausal symptoms

Hormone therapy may cause menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Some chemotherapy drugs can lead to early menopause, menopausal symptoms and a loss of bone density. Talk with your doctor about what you can do to relieve these side effects.

Nerve pain or numbness (neuropathy)

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause nerve damage. You may feel a burning or shooting pain, or numbness. This usually occurs in your fingers or toes (peripheral neuropathy). Most of the time these side effects go away after chemotherapy ends. Sometimes the pain or numbness can persist.

Pain

Aromatase inhibitors may cause joint and muscle pain. Exercise (such as walking, stretching or yoga) may help reduce this pain. Pain from breast cancer treatment usually goes away after treatment ends. If you have pain for longer periods, talk with your doctor.

Sex and intimacy

Sex and intimacy can be difficult after breast cancer. Hormone therapy may cause a loss of desire and vaginal changes that can make sex painful. Changes in your body may affect your sexuality. Talk with your doctor, a mental health provider or counselor. They can often provide treatment and support services.

Weight gain

Weight gain is a common side effect of chemotherapy. Try to eat a healthy diet and exercise. Having a healthy weight and exercising have been shown to improve survival after breast cancer treatment.

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