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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# After Chemotherapy for Breast Cancer

This information explains what to expect after you finish your chemotherapy (chemo) treatment for breast cancer.

Most people are relieved when they finish chemo, but some people may feel worried. For months, you've seen your healthcare providers very often. They could answer your questions and support you at each visit. Now that you've finished chemo, you will not see them as often. But you may still have questions and concerns.

Remember that just because you've finished chemo does not mean that you're on your own. Your care team will keep caring for you now and in the future.

## Side effects after chemotherapy

After you finish chemo, you may have some remaining side effects. Most side effects go away soon after your last dose of chemo. But other side effects can last for weeks or months. Some of them are listed below. Talk with your healthcare provider to learn more about each side effect.

### Low blood counts

After your last dose of chemo, your white blood cell count will go down. It should start to go back to normal about 1 month after your last treatment. Your red blood cell count may also go down. It should start to go back to normal around the same time.

## Hair loss

If you lost your hair, it should start growing back 14 to 21 days after your last chemo treatment. This is about 2 to 3 weeks. The amount of time it takes to grow back is different for everyone.

When your hair grows back, it may be a different color or texture. These changes are normal. Over time, most people's hair goes back to its original color and texture. But some people may have long-term changes.

To learn more about hair loss, read *Hair Loss and Your Cancer Treatment* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/hair\\_loss\\_cancer\\_treatment](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/hair_loss_cancer_treatment)).

## Neuropathy

Some chemo medicines can cause neuropathy (numbness or tingling in your hands and feet). It may get worse after you have your last chemo treatment. Most people notice that their neuropathy gets better 2 to 4 months after chemo. But it can take up to 1 year to fully go away. For some people, it never fully goes away.

To learn more about neuropathy, read *About Peripheral Neuropathy* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/about-peripheral-neuropathy](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/about-peripheral-neuropathy)).

## Nausea, vomiting, and taste changes

You may have nausea (feeling like you might throw up) and vomiting (throwing up) after your last chemo treatment. It should go away in 2 to 3 weeks.

Your appetite (desire to eat) may still be different because your sense of taste may have changed during treatment. Your taste should go back to normal 1 to 2 months after chemo. In the meantime, there are things you can do to help with these changes. Talk with your care team to learn more.

## Fatigue

Your fatigue (feeling more tired or weak than usual) will get better over time. You may have lost some muscle and strength during your treatment. If you did, you'll need to build it up again slowly. Walking or doing another form of light

exercise each day will help with this.

To learn more about managing your fatigue, read and watch:

- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/managing-fatigue](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/managing-fatigue))
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/manage-fatigue-video](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/manage-fatigue-video)) (video)
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue for Survivors* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue-survivors](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue-survivors)) (video)
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue with Exercise* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue-exercise](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue-exercise))

## Chemo brain and stress

Many people have mental changes after chemo treatment. This is sometimes called “chemo brain.” You may have problems, such as:

- Poor memory
- Trouble finding words
- Trouble focusing

Chemo brain can affect parts of your life, including caring for your family and managing your job.

Some things that can help with chemo brain are:

- Keeping a calendar
- Writing everything down
- Exercising your brain with puzzles and reading

Try to focus on 1 task at a time instead of more than 1 task. You can also work with an occupational therapist for cognitive (mind or thinking) behavioral rehabilitation. This is a treatment to help you if you have cognitive issues.

Occupational therapists work in [Rehabilitation Services](#). To learn more about cognitive behavioral rehabilitation, ask your healthcare provider for a referral.

Try to avoid setting goals for yourself that are too high. This can add to your stress level and frustration. Most people say it takes 6 to 12 months after they finish chemo before they truly feel like themselves again.

To learn more about managing chemo brain, read *Managing Cognitive Changes* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/cognitive\\_changes](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/cognitive_changes)).

## Fear of cancer coming back

After treatment, many people may be afraid that their cancer will come back (recurrence). You may become concerned about new symptoms you're having and wonder if they're related to breast cancer.

It's important to talk with your healthcare provider about any new symptoms you notice. Many of these issues are a normal part of healing. They can happen as your body adjusts to a new normal after breast cancer treatment. Your care team is always here to talk with you about any of your concerns or fears.

You can call or send messages to your care team through MSK MyChart ([mskmychart.mskcc.org](http://mskmychart.mskcc.org)). It may also be helpful to talk with a social worker, therapist, or chaplain (spiritual counselor). You can also join a support group.

To learn more, read *MSK Support Services* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/support](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/support)).

## Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers therapies that can help you manage side effects after chemo. Some services they offer are:

- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Yoga
- Other relaxation techniques

These services can help control pain, nausea, fatigue, anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping, and other symptoms. For a full list of therapies offered, visit [www.msk.org/integrativemedicine](http://www.msk.org/integrativemedicine). or call 646-449-1010 to make an

appointment.

To learn more about these therapies, read *Integrative Medicine Therapies and Your Cancer Treatment* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/integrative-therapies](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/integrative-therapies)).

## Follow-up care

You'll see your doctor every 4 to 6 months for the next 5 years for follow-up appointments. If you have any questions or concerns, call your doctor's office at any time.

At each visit, your care team will ask you if you've noticed any changes in your health. You'll also have:

- A physical exam.
- Blood work. Depending on the stage of cancer, this may include a test for tumor markers. These are blood tests that look for proteins that may show if the cancer has come back.
- Imaging tests, if needed.

It's important to follow-up with your primary care provider for your routine care as well. This includes blood pressure checks, cholesterol tests, and other standard lab or blood work. Make sure your MSK doctors have all your health information. This includes your primary care provider's name and contact information.

About 2 to 5 years after you finish treatment, your care will be changed over to a survivorship nurse practitioner (SNP). An SNP is a member of the MSK breast cancer team who works closely with your doctor.

As you need less breast cancer–related care, your follow-up care may move from MSK to your primary care provider. This often happens about 10 years after you finish treatment but may happen sooner or later. It depends on the type of breast cancer you had and the treatment you had.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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