PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

After Chemotherapy for Breast Cancer

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

Most people are relieved when they finish chemotherapy, 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 chemotherapy, you won't see them as often, but you'll likely continue to have questions and concerns. It's important to remember that just because you've finished chemotherapy doesn't mean that you're on your own. Your healthcare providers will continue to care for you now and in the future.

Side Effects After Chemotherapy

After you finish chemotherapy, you may have some remaining side effects. While most will go away soon after your last dose, others can last for weeks or months. Some of these side effects are listed below. For more information on each side effect, talk with your healthcare provider.

Low blood counts

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

Hair loss

If you lost your hair, you should start to see it grow back 14 to 21 days after your last chemotherapy treatment. 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. For more information, read the resource *Hair Loss and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/hair_loss_cancer_treatment).

Neuropathy

Some chemotherapy medications can cause neuropathy (numbness or tingling in your hands and feet). It may get worse after you have your last chemotherapy treatment. Most people notice that their neuropathy gets better 2 to 4 months after chemotherapy, but it can take up to 1 year to fully go away. For some people, it never completely goes away. For more information about neuropathy, read the resource *About Peripheral Neuropathy* (www.mskcc.org/pe/about_peripheral_neuropathy).

Nausea, vomiting, and taste changes

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

Your appetite may continue to be affected due to taste changes you may have experienced during your treatment. Your taste should go back to normal 1 to 2 months after chemotherapy. In the meantime, there are things you can do to help with these changes. Talk with your nurse if you'd like more information.

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 and will need to build it up again slowly. Walking or doing another form of

light exercise each day will help with this.

For more information about managing your fatigue, read the following resources:

- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue* (www.mskcc.org/pe/managing_fatigue)
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue* (www.mskcc.org/pe/manage_fatigue_video) (video)
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue for Survivors* (www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue_survivors) (video)
- *Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue with Exercise* (www.mskcc.org/pe/fatigue_exercise)

“Chemo brain” and stress

Many people experience mental changes after chemotherapy treatment. This is sometimes called “chemo brain.” You may have problems such as poor memory, trouble finding words, difficulty focusing. This can affect parts of your life, including caring for your family and managing your job.

Some things that help with chemo brain include keeping a calendar, writing everything down, and 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. For more information about cognitive behavioral rehabilitation, talk with your healthcare provider for a referral.

Try to avoid having 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 chemotherapy before they truly feel like themselves again. Read the resource *Managing Cognitive Changes* (www.mskcc.org/pe/cognitive_changes) for more information about managing chemo brain.

Fear of cancer coming back

After treatment, many people might 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 normal parts of healing and your body returning to a new normal after breast cancer treatment. Your healthcare team is always available to discuss your concerns or fears with you.

You can call or send messages to your doctor or nurse through MyMSK (my.mskcc.org). It may also be helpful to talk with a social worker, therapist, or chaplain. You can also join a support group. For more information, read *MSK Support Services* (www.mskcc.org/pe/support).

Integrative Medicine

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers therapies that may help you manage the side effects after chemotherapy. 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 complete list of therapies offered, visit their website at www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine or call 646-449-1010 to make an appointment. For more information about these therapies, read *Integrative Medicine Therapies and Your Cancer Treatment* (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, you can call your doctor's office at any time.

At each visit, your healthcare team will ask you if you've noticed any changes in your health. You'll also have a physical exam, blood work (which may include a test for tumor markers depending on your stage of cancer), and imaging tests, if needed.

It's important to also follow-up with your primary care provider for your routine healthcare as well. This includes blood pressure checks, cholesterol tests, and other standard lab or blood work. It's important that your doctors at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) have all your health information, including your primary care provider's contact information.

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

As your breast cancer-related needs decrease, your follow-up care may be transferred from MSK to your primary care provider. This usually happens about 10 years after treatment, but depends on the type of breast cancer you have and the treatment you received.

> If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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