

Breast Cancer: Follow-up After Surgery

What is the follow-up after breast cancer treatment?

After you have finished your treatment for breast cancer, you will see your cancer specialist about every 4 to 6 months for the first 5 years. After 5 years, depending on how you are doing, your visits will probably be yearly.

What happens during follow-up exams?

At each follow-up visit, your provider will check for return of the cancer or spread of the cancer to other parts of your body. A history and physical exam are the most important parts of your care. You may have lab tests.

You should have a mammogram every year. Your provider may not recommend any other X-ray exams unless you have symptoms. If a lump is found, it will be checked for cancer. You may need a biopsy.

What if I am taking tamoxifen or a similar drug?

Tamoxifen is a medicine that may be prescribed for some types of breast cancer. It can stop the hormone estrogen from helping tumors grow. If you are taking tamoxifen or a similar drug, you will need these tests:

- Yearly pelvic exam if you still have a uterus
- Regular bone density tests

How can I take care of myself?

After you have had cancer, it is common to worry that cancer will come back. There are many support groups for women who have had breast cancer. These groups can help with emotional concerns and questions about life after treatment. They can also help with practical things, such as finding comfortable bras and bathing suits. Ask your healthcare provider for information about the group nearest you.

Once your energy returns, stay active and try to keep a healthy weight. Be sure to eat a healthy diet, quit smoking if you are a smoker, and follow an exercise program recommended by your healthcare provider.

Regularly examine your breasts, or breast area if your breasts have been removed. Between visits with your healthcare provider, watch for the following signs that the cancer may have come back:

- Changes you feel in a breast or in your scar during a breast self-exam, especially thickenings, lumps, redness, pain, or swelling
- Long-lasting pain in the shoulders, ribs, hip, back, belly, or legs
- Loss of appetite or unexplained weight loss or gain
- Long-lasting cough

None of these symptoms is a clear sign that the cancer has come back. It is important, though, to report any of these changes to your provider as soon as possible. Do not wait until your next scheduled checkup.

For more information on cancer, contact:

- American Cancer Society, Inc.
800-227-2345
<http://www.cancer.org>
- Cancer Information Service
800-422-6237
<http://www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/cis>

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