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After Thyroid Cancer Treatment

Get information about how to live well after thyroid cancer treatment and how to make decisions about next steps.

Living as a Cancer Survivor

For many people, cancer treatment often raises questions about next steps as a survivor.

- [Living as a Thyroid Cancer Survivor](#)

Cancer Concerns After Treatment

Treatment may remove or destroy the cancer, but it is very common to have questions about cancer coming back or treatment no longer working.

- [Second Cancers After Thyroid Cancer](#)

Living as a Thyroid Cancer Survivor

For many people, treatment removes or destroys the cancer. If you've finished treatment, you might be relieved. Completing treatment for thyroid cancer can be both stressful and exciting. But you might also find it hard not to worry about your cancer growing or coming back. This is very common concern.

For other people, thyroid cancer might not go away completely, or it might come back in another part of the body. In this case, you might need regular treatments to help keep the cancer under control for as long as possible. Learning to live with cancer that doesn't go away can be difficult and very stressful.

No matter what your situation is, there are steps you can take to live well, both physically and emotionally.

- [Follow-up care](#)
- [Can I lower the risk of my thyroid cancer progressing or coming back?](#)
- [Second cancers after treatment](#)
- [Getting emotional support](#)

Follow-up care

Whether or not you've completed treatment, your cancer care team will want to watch you closely. It's very important to go to all follow-up appointments. During these visits, they will examine you and ask about your symptoms. They might also order blood tests or imaging tests such as radioiodine scans or ultrasounds.

This follow-up care is needed to check for cancer recurrence or spread, as well as

Doctor visits and follow-up tests

Your cancer care team will explain what tests you need and how often you need them. Your schedule of doctor visits, exams, and tests will depend on the type of thyroid cancer you've had, the original extent of the cancer, how it was treated, and other factors.

Papillary or follicular thyroid cancer

For papillary or follicular cancer, your follow-up will depend largely on the type of treatment you had. Along with regular physical exams, you'll likely need other tests as well.

If your thyroid gland was completely removed (with a thyroidectomy) and you had radioactive iodine (RAI) treatment, you will likely get a radioactive iodine scan, especially if you are at higher risk for recurrence.

This is usually done about 6 to 12 months later. If the result is negative (that is, if the test doesn't show any areas taking up iodine), you most likely won't need further radioactive iodine scans unless you have symptoms or

scan may be done to look for any signs of the cancer coming back.

If the tests show recurrent cancer, treatment is as described in [Treatment of Thyroid Cancer, by Type and Stage](#)⁵.

Asking your doctor for a survivorship care plan

Talk with your doctor about creating a [survivorship care plan](#)⁶ for you. This plan might include:

- A suggested schedule for follow-up exams and tests
- A list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your health care team
- A schedule for other tests you might need, such as early detection (screening) tests for other types of cancer, or tests to look for long-term health effects from your cancer or its treatment
- Diet and physical activity suggestions that might improve your health, including possibly lowering your chances of the cancer coming back
- Reminders to keep your appointments with your primary care provider (PCP), who will monitor your general health

If you have, or had, thyroid cancer, you probably want to know if there are things you can do to lower your risk of the cancer growing or coming back, such as exercising, eating a certain type of diet, or taking nutritional supplements.

Adopting healthy behaviors such as not smoking, eating well, getting regular physical activity, and staying at a healthy weight may help, but this isn't clear. Still, we do know that these types of changes can have many positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of thyroid cancer.

Learn more: [Cancer Risk and Prevention](#)⁹

About dietary supplements

So far, no [dietary supplements](#)¹⁰ (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of thyroid cancer progressing or coming back. This doesn't mean that no supplements will help. But it's important to know that none have been proven to do so.

In the United States, dietary supplements are not regulated like medicines. They don't have to be proven effective (or even safe) before being sold, although there are limits on what they're allowed to claim they can do.

If you're thinking about taking any type of nutritional supplement, talk to your health care team. They can help you decide which ones you can use safely while avoiding those that might be harmful.

If the cancer comes back

If your cancer does come back at some point, your treatment options will depend on where the cancer is, what treatments you've had before, and your current health and preferences.

Treatment options might include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, or some combination of these. For more on how recurrent thyroid cancer is treated, see [Treatment of Thyroid Cancer, by Type and Stage](#)¹¹.

For general information on cancer recurrence, see [Understanding Recurrence](#)¹².

Second cancers after treatment

People who've had cancer can be affected by a number of health problems, but often a

major concern is facing cancer again. Cancer that comes back after treatment is called a

prostate cancer.

Getting emotional support

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when thyroid cancer is a part of your life. Some people are affected more than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support, whether that's from friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others.

[Life After Cancer](#) ²²

Learn more.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.orgamericancancer.sharepoint.com/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects.html
2. www.cancer.orgamericancancer.sharepoint.com/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/long-term-side-effects-of-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.orgamericancancer.sharepoint.com/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html
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22. www.cancer.org/americancancer.sharepoint.com/cancer/survivorship/be-healthy-after-treatment/life-after-cancer.html

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Rock CL, Thomson C, Gansler T, et al. American Cancer Society guideline for diet and physical activity for cancer prevention. *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*. 2020;70(4). doi:10.3322/caac.21591. Accessed at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.3322/caac.21591> on June 9, 2020.

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Second Cancers After Thyroid Cancer

Adrenal cancer risk is especially high in people who had the medullary type of thyroid cancer.

Patients treated with radioactive iodine also have an increased risk of [acute lymphocytic leukemia \(ALL\)](#)⁶, [stomach cancer](#)⁷, and [salivary gland cancer](#)⁸.

What can you do?

After completing treatment for thyroid cancer, you should see your doctor regularly. You may also have tests to look for signs that the cancer has come back or spread. Experts do not recommend any additional testing to look for second cancers in patients without symptoms. Let your doctor know about any new symptoms or problems, because they could be caused by the thyroid cancer coming back or by a new disease or second cancer.

Patients who have completed treatment should keep up with [early detection \(screening\) tests](#)⁹ for other types of cancer.

All patients should be encouraged to [avoid tobacco smoke](#)¹⁰, as smoking increases the risk of many cancers.

To [help maintain good health](#)¹¹, survivors should also:

- Get to and stay at a healthy weight
- Keep physically active and limit the time you spend sitting or lying down
- Follow a healthy eating pattern that includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limits or avoids red and processed meats, sugary drinks, and highly processed foods
- Not drink [alcohol](#)¹². If you do drink, have no more than 1 drink per day for women or 2 per day for men

These steps may also lower the risk of some other health problems.

See [Second Cancers in Adults](#)¹³ for more information about causes of second cancers.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/prostate-cancer.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/kidney-cancer.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/adrenal-cancer.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/acute-lymphocytic-leukemia.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/stomach-cancer.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/salivary-gland-cancer.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/screening.html
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/tobacco.html
11. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/diet-physical-activity.html
12. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/diet-physical-activity/alcohol-use-and-cancer.html
13. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/second-cancers-in-adults.html

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