Breast Cancer Follow-Up Appointments with Your Family Doctor

Information for breast cancer patients who have finished treatment

Read this resource to learn about:

- What is follow-up care
- How often you need it
- What happens at the appointment
- Where to get more information

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca

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What is “follow-up care”?

After cancer treatment, you will need regular appointments with a doctor. These are called “follow-up appointments”. These appointments will help keep you healthy. They will help catch any health problems early. You will need these for the rest of your life.

You may have had regular appointments with your oncologist (cancer doctor). From now on, these appointments will be with your family doctor or Family Health Team. You will have to book appointments with this doctor yourself. Information has been sent to your family doctor so that they know all the testing and treatments you have had.

Read this resource to learn how to have an active role in your care!

How often should I go?

For 5 years after you have finished cancer treatment:
You should visit your family doctor every 6 months.

After 5 years, for the rest of your life:
You should visit your family doctor once a year.

What happens at these follow-up visits?

At these appointments, your doctor will:
1. Check to see if the cancer has come back
2. Check for side effects
3. Answer your health questions

Read the sections below to learn more.
1. Checking to see if the cancer has come back

The doctor will do these things to check for cancer:

- **Physical exam.**
  Your family doctor will likely be checking your:
  - breasts
  - lymph nodes
  - chest wall
  - lungs
  - abdomen (belly)

- **Ask about symptoms.**
  Your doctor will ask if you have felt any of these symptoms:
  - bone pain
  - cough
  - breast lumps
  - mastectomy scar changes
  - fatigue (tired all the time)
  - swollen arms

If you notice any of these symptoms, tell your doctor right away. Do not wait for your regular follow-up appointment. Your doctor may order tests to find out why you have developed symptoms.
• **Mammogram.**
  You should get 1 every year.

• **Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).**
  Your doctor may order an MRI in certain cases. It is not usually needed for breast cancer follow-up appointments.

You will not need other blood tests or scans at every follow-up. Research has shown they do not help.

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2. **Checking for side effects**

Your doctor will check for these side effects:

• **Trouble concentrating.**
  Many survivors will experience this. This is also called “chemobrain.” Your doctor may suggest ways to help you manage.

• **Feeling tired all the time.**
  Feeling tired all the time is called, “fatigue”. For every 3 people who survive cancer, 1 will have fatigue. There are no special treatments for fatigue. Depression or pain could also make you more tired. Your doctor can treat these.

You can also try these things:

• Exercise.
• Keep a healthy sleep routine.
• Reduce your stress. You can try cognitive relaxation therapy.
• **Issues with sexual health.**
  Many women feel different after chemotherapy or surgery. Talk to your doctor if you have any sexual issues.

• **Hot Flushes.**
  Many women develop hot flushes as a result of breast cancer treatment. If they are severe and interfere with your life, your doctor can prescribe a non-hormonal medicine to help.

If you took Aromatase Inhibitors or had menopause before 45:
Your doctor will check you for osteoporosis (weak bones). This is because the medicine or early menopause will increase the chance of you getting weak bones. Your doctor may order a test called “Dual-Energy X-ray Absorptiometry” (DEXA). This test will show how dense your bones are.

If you are taking tamoxifen:
Your doctor will ask you about vaginal bleeding. This is because this medicine can increase your chance of getting endometrial cancer (uterus cancer). Your doctor will order a test if you have vaginal bleeding. Otherwise, tests are not necessary.

### 3. Answering your health questions

Ask your doctor any health questions you might have. Here are some topics you might want to talk about:

• **How to keep a healthy weight.**
  Keep a healthy weight. This can help reduce your chance of getting cancer again. Talk to your doctor about your weight.

• **Having children.**
  Talk to your doctor if you are thinking about having children. There may be some risks to having children after cancer treatment. This is a complex issue.
Where can I get more information?

You can visit these websites:

Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada
www.willow.org/resources

Rethink Breast Cancer
www.rethinkbreastcancer.com/breast-cancer/resources/

Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation
www.cbcf.org/ontario/AboutBreastCancerMain/AfterTreatment/

ELLICSR: Health, Wellness and Cancer Survivorship Centre
www.ellicsr.ca

St. Michael’s Hospital Online Survivorship Guide
http://breastcancer09.utorontoeit.com/Patient_Home.html