

# Managing Body Image Concerns after Cancer Treatment



## For cancer survivors

Cancer and its treatment can change how your body looks, feels, and performs. These changes can affect your body image.

It is normal to feel anxious and upset about changes in your body. You may have trouble getting used to these changes.

Read this handout to learn about:

- What are some common changes in your body after cancer?
- How can these changes affect my body image?
- How can this affect me in other ways?
- What can I do?

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca)  
© 2017 University Health Network. All rights reserved.  
This information is to be used for informational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Please consult your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. A single copy of these materials may be reprinted for non-commercial personal use only.

Author: Dr. Mary Jane Esplen PhD, RN, Dr. Doris Howell, PhD, RN and ELLICSR Research team  
Reviewed: 03/2017  
Form: D-5958

## **What is body image?**

Body image is how you see your body. It is also how you feel about the way you look.

## **What are some common changes in your body after cancer?**

Cancer and cancer treatment can cause a number of changes in your body. This is true for many patients, but not all patients.

Some common changes are:

- scars (if you have had surgery)
- hair loss (if you had chemotherapy or radiation)
- loss or change in shape, size or swelling to a body part
- skin changes such as redness, itching, more sensitivity, or pain in the area that you had treatment
- weight changes (weight gain or weight loss)
- problems with balance, movement or physical activity
- muscle weakness or fatigue that does not go away
- changes in your sexual functioning, such as loss of sexual interest, erectile difficulties, vaginal dryness, muscle weakness, infertility (being unable to conceive a child), and early menopause

## **How long will these changes last?**

These physical changes may be temporary or permanent. Talk to your doctor about your situation.

## **How can these changes affect my body image?**

You may still be coping with the effects of your treatment. Changes that are visible (such as changes to your skin, hair or weight) can make you feel uncomfortable with your body. How you look can be important.

It can take time to get over these effects. You may feel different about your body, even if there are no lasting physical changes to your body. Cancer survivors describe both positive and negative changes in their body image.

Here are some negative changes you may have:

- lose confidence in your body and its abilities
- feel that your body has “let you down”
- see your body as weak or vulnerable

Here are some positive changes you may have:

- feeling more aware of your body, or feeling like you “know” your body
- feeling stronger because you got through your treatment
- feeling energized to treat your body well (eating healthier foods and exercising)

## **How can this affect me in other ways?**

Your feelings about the way you look may also affect your “self-image”. This is how you see yourself as a person (your likes and dislikes, personality, beliefs, and values). How you feel about your “self-image” may also change how you relate to others.

You may also be coping with changes that others cannot see. These can include feeling tired, having a hidden scar, infertility, or early menopause. These changes can make you feel different about yourself. You may worry if you will be able to carry out the same roles you had before.

It is important to talk about any changes and how they affect your self-esteem or sense of yourself.

## **What can I do?**

It is normal to feel sad and upset over the changes in your body. Body appearance is very important to many people. Try not to compare yourself to others. You may feel differently about your body in different situations. You need to adapt in your own way and at your own pace.

If you are a young adult, the way your body looks can be very important to you. Being athletic, healthy, strong or attractive can be an important part of how you think of yourself. It is normal to feel sad and upset over changes in your body.

### **Here are some ways to cope:**

#### **Give yourself some time.**

Give yourself time to grieve over any changes to your body. Also give yourself time to adjust to your new body, and heal from your treatments.

#### **Remember that you are still yourself.**

Even though your body may look or feel different, you may discover other strengths you did not know you had.

#### **Be open and creative.**

If you cannot do some of the things you used to, be open to trying new things. You may find new activities that you like. Learning a new physical skill can help you regain confidence in your body.

#### **Take care of your body.**

Eating well and getting enough sleep is important. Exercise can help improve your mood, reduce fatigue and give you strength. Check with your doctor before you start a new exercise routine to reduce the risk of injuring yourself.

#### **Talk to other cancer survivors.**

Talk to other cancer survivors about how they coped with their body changes. It can help to join a support group. You can also speak to family and friends who are easy to talk to.

### **Be ready for conversations.**

Others may ask you questions or make comments about how you look. Think about how you will respond. If you prefer not to talk about it, just tell your friends that you do not want to talk about it right now.

### **Talk to your doctor about your concerns.**

Ask your doctor about other health professionals who can help you manage any physical limitations. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist.

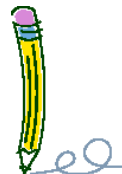
## **How do I talk to my doctor about body image problems?**

It is important to talk to your doctor or health professional about all your concerns. It may seem hard to bring up issues like sexuality or appearance. But it is important for them to hear about these issues. They are impacts of cancer on your quality of life.

Your doctor can help you to find a professional to support you. This may help you to cope and adjust better to changes in your body.

To help you talk to your doctor:

1. Write down your questions or concerns.
2. Show your questions to your doctor or health professional.
3. Write down their answers (to help you remember what they said).



## **Where can I get more information?**

### **Internet Resources:**

LIVESTRONG: Body Image

Website: [www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)

Look Good...Feel Better

Website: [lgfb.ca](http://lgfb.ca)

### **Online communities:**

These websites allow you to share your experiences, ask questions and get support from others over the internet.

Health talk online

Website: [www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)

Macmillan's own online community

Website: [community.macmillan.org.uk](http://community.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Look Good...Feel Better program:**

This free program teaches ways to manage your appearance. It also teaches self-esteem. The program is for people having cancer treatment. It may also be open to people who have recently finished treatment.

For more information, call: 1-800-914-5665 or visit [www.lgfb.ca](http://www.lgfb.ca).

### **Remember:**

- ✓ Give yourself some time
- ✓ Remember that you are still yourself
- ✓ Be open and creative
- ✓ Take care of your body
- ✓ Speak to other survivors
- ✓ Be ready for conversations
- ✓ Talk to your doctor