

Symptom Management

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Side Effects of Breast Cancer Treatment

Because it is difficult to keep healthy cells safe while trying to destroy cancer cells, most cancer treatments have side effects. Here are some common side effects of different treatments used in breast cancer.

Side Effects of Breast Cancer Surgery

The surgeon will explain possible side effects with a woman before she has surgery. After surgery, a woman's health-care team will work closely with her to manage or relieve as many of her side effects as possible. Below is a description of side effects resulting from breast cancer surgery.

- **Temporary pain.** Surgery can cause pain and tenderness in the area that was operated on. Women may want to talk with their doctors and nurses about how to control the pain.
- **Shift in weight.** Removal of a breast can make a woman's weight shift, and she may feel off-balance, especially if she has large breasts. This can cause discomfort in a woman's neck and back.
- **Tightness in skin.** The skin in the breast area may be tight, and the muscles of the arm and shoulder may feel stiff. After breast surgery, some women lose strength in these muscles, but this is usually temporary. The doctor, nurse, or physical therapist can recommend exercises to help a woman use her arm and shoulder normally again.
- **Changes in sensation.** In order to remove the breast in a mastectomy, the nerves, which give feeling to the skin over the breast, must be cut. This results in numbness or tingling over the chest in almost all women. Sensation often returns 1 to 2 years after surgery, but is usually not completely normal. Similar feelings may be noted on the upper inner part of the arm if the nerve to this area cannot be saved during removal of the underarm lymph nodes.
- **Phantom breast sensations.** Some women may also feel that their breast is still there after it has been removed. This phenomenon, known as phantom breast sensation, can be a temporary sensation or a permanent one. People who have had a limb removed experience this as well. If a woman experiences this, she should let her doctor or nurse know.
- **Lymphedema.** If a woman's lymph nodes are removed from her armpit, she may experience swelling in her hand or arm on the side where she had her surgery. This risk is increased if she also has radiation therapy to her armpit. This is called lymphedema. It may occur right after surgery or it may happen later. It is caused when excess lymph collects in tissue. A woman's doctor or nurse can suggest ways to help deal with this side effect. There are things a woman can do to decrease her risk of lymphedema. She should protect her arm and hand from injury, avoid heavy lifting, and notify her doctor immediately of any signs of infection, such as redness or warmth, pain that starts suddenly, and swelling in the arm. For more information visit the National Lymphedema Network at www.lymphnet.org.



- **Rare side effects.** A woman's doctor may review the following rare side effects with her before surgery
- Although not common, there is a **risk of infection** when a person has surgery.
- **Poor wound healing**, bleeding, or a reaction to the anesthesia are uncommon side effects that may occur with surgery. Women who experience any of these side effects should tell their doctor or nurse right away.

Symptom Management Introduction

Side Effects of Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer

One common side effect of radiation therapy is dry, tender, and itchy skin in the treated area. Toward the end of treatment, the skin may become very red. Being exposed to air will help the skin heal. Because bras and some clothing may rub and irritate the skin, patients may want to wear loose-fitting cotton clothes. Patients should talk to their doctor or nurse before they use deodorants, lotions, or creams on the treated area. These effects of radiation therapy on the skin are temporary, and the area heals when treatment is over.



For most women, the breast will look and feel about the same after radiation therapy as before. However, sometimes the treated breast will be firmer. It may also change in size and become larger because of fluid buildup, or smaller because of tissue changes. For some women, the breast skin is more sensitive after radiation treatment. For others it is less sensitive.

Another common side effect of radiation therapy is fatigue, especially later in the treatment and for a while afterward. The radiation oncologists therapist and nurse will explain possible side effects and what to do about them.

Side Effects of Chemotherapy for Breast Cancer

Side effects of chemotherapy are different for everyone. A woman's medical oncologist and chemotherapy nurse will discuss possible side effects with her before treatment begins.

Side effects of chemotherapy depend heavily on the drug combinations which are used. In general, patients are at greater risk for getting infections, for bruising or bleeding easily, and they may have less energy during treatment and for a while afterward. Patients may also have side effects such as hair loss, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, mouth sores, and numbness or tingling in the hands and feet. Many of these side effects can be controlled, and most go away during the recovery part of the chemotherapy cycle or after the treatment is completed.



Some anti-cancer drugs can damage the ovaries. If the ovaries are damaged, they may stop producing hormones. This means that a woman may experience symptoms of menopause -- like hot flashes and vaginal dryness -- if she is premenopausal. Her periods may become irregular or may stop, and she may not be able to get pregnant. However, some women may still be able to get pregnant during treatment. Because doctors don't know how chemotherapy affects an unborn child, a woman should talk to her doctor about using birth control before treatment begins. After treatment, some women can get pregnant, but if the patient is older than 40, infertility is usually permanent.

There may be long-term side effects of chemotherapy. These effects depend on the drugs that were used. A woman should ask her doctor or nurse what the possible long-term side effects of her treatment may be and how to watch for them.

Side Effects of Hormonal Therapy for Breast Cancer

Hormonal therapy can cause many side effects, which a woman's doctor should explain. These side effects depend on what kind of drug the patient is given. Treatment drugs may cause hot flashes, weight changes, vaginal discharge or irritation, and irregular periods. Any unusual bleeding should be reported to the doctor.



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