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Skin Cancer (Non-Melanoma) - Follow-Up Care [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 06/2015

ON THIS PAGE: You will read about your medical care after cancer treatment is completed, and why this follow-up care is important. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Care for people diagnosed with cancer doesn't end when active treatment has finished. Your health care team will continue to check to make sure the cancer has not returned, manage any side effects, and monitor your overall health. This is called follow-up care.

This plan may include regular physical examinations and/or medical tests to monitor your recovery for the coming months and years. An important part of your follow-up care will be regular screening for new skin cancers, which should include whole-body skin examinations by a health care professional. This is because many people treated for one skin cancer develop other skin cancers later.

Watching for recurrence

One goal of follow-up care is to check for a recurrence. Cancer recurs because small areas of cancer cells may remain undetected in the body. Over time, these cells may increase in number until they show up on test results or cause signs or symptoms. During follow-up care, a doctor familiar with your medical history can give you personalized information about your risk of recurrence. Your doctor will also ask specific questions about your health. Some people may have blood tests or imaging tests as part of regular follow-up care, but testing recommendations depend on several factors including the type and stage of cancer originally diagnosed and the types of treatment given.

Managing long-term and late side effects

Most people expect to experience side effects when receiving treatment. However, it is often surprising to survivors that some side effects may linger beyond the treatment period. These are called long-term side effects. In addition, other side effects called late effects may develop months or even years afterwards. Long-term and late effects can include both physical and emotional changes.

For most people with skin cancer, surgery removes only a small part of the skin. However, if surgery was more extensive, there may be some need for rehabilitation [3] services. People who have had multiple surgeries, particularly on their face, may have a substantially altered appearance. Scars from surgery may be itchy, painful, or limit the ability to move nearby skin. This can be improved by a plastic surgeon or a dermatologist. Rarely, the eyelid may be altered. The eyelid may not close well, and the person may need to use drops to moisten the eye.

When extensive facial surgery is necessary, the person will need support and possibly the help of a caregiver during treatment and recovery. Some of these surgeries are done in several steps and may require a long-term absence from work or other activities.

When radiation therapy is used, there is a small possibility that a second cancer may develop, which may not appear for more than 10 years after treatment. Also, the skin may become thin, discolored, and hard many years after finishing radiation therapy. This can be improved with physical therapy and oral or topical medications prescribed by a dermatologist.

Cancer rehabilitation services may be recommended, including physical therapy, career counseling, pain management, nutritional planning, and/or emotional counseling. The goal of rehabilitation is to help people regain control over many aspects of their lives and remain as independent and productive as possible.

Talk with your doctor about your risk of developing such side effects based on the type of cancer, your individual treatment plan, and your overall health. If you had a treatment known to cause specific late effects, you may also have certain physical examinations, scans, or blood tests to help find and manage them.

Keeping personal health records

You and your doctor should work together to develop a personalized follow-up care plan. Be sure to ask about any concerns you have about your future physical or emotional health. ASCO offers forms to help create a treatment summary to keep track of the cancer treatment you received and develop a survivorship care plan [4] once treatment is completed.

This is also a good time to decide who will lead your follow-up care. Some survivors continue to see a specialist like a dermatologist or oncologist, while others transition back to the general care of their family doctor or another health care professional. This decision depends on several factors, including the type and stage of cancer, side effects, health insurance rules, and your

personal preferences.

If a doctor who was not directly involved in your cancer care will lead your follow-up care, be sure to share your cancer treatment summary and survivorship care plan forms with him or her, as well as all future health care providers. Details about your cancer treatment are very valuable to the health care professionals who will care for you throughout your lifetime.

Making healthy lifestyle choices

Many people who are treated for skin cancer lead an active, outdoor lifestyle, and it is very important to take steps to protect your skin from further damage. Participating in outdoor activities before 10:00 AM or after 4:00 PM and wearing long sleeves, pants, broad-spectrum sunscreen, sunglasses with UV protection, and a wide-brimmed hat will protect against further skin damage. Learn more about protecting your skin from the sun. [5]

People recovering from skin cancer are encouraged to follow established guidelines for good health, such as not smoking, limiting alcohol, eating well, and managing stress. Regular physical activity can help rebuild your strength and energy level. Your health care team can help you create an appropriate exercise plan based upon your needs, physical abilities, and fitness level. Learn more about making healthy lifestyle choices [6].

The next section offers Questions to Ask the Doctor [7] to help start conversations with your cancer care team. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.

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