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Side Effects of Surgery [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2014

Key Messages:

- Surgery, like many treatments for cancer, may cause different side effects that depend on the type of surgery you received and what parts of your body were affected.
- Relieving side effects from surgery is an important part of your care. Talk with your health care team about pain and any other side effects you experience.
- Depending on the surgery you received, you may have other concerns, such as changes to your diet, ability to be physically active, body image, and sexual and reproductive health.

Cancer surgery, like all cancer treatments, has its benefits, risks, and side effects. The types and intensity of side effects vary from person to person based on the type and location of the cancer, the type of surgery, and the person's overall health. If you and your doctor decide that surgery will be a part of your cancer treatment, you will be given information about all aspects of your surgical treatment before you consent to surgery, including the side effects you may experience.

With recent advances in surgical techniques, such as minimally invasive surgery, the side effects of surgery are often milder than they were in the past, and patients may recover faster. In addition, doctors have made major strides in recent years in reducing pain and other physical side effects from all types of surgery. Relieving side effects, also called symptom management, [palliative care](#) [3], or supportive care, is an important part of cancer care and treatment. Talk with your health care team about any side effects from surgery you may experience, including any new side effects or a change in side effects.

Common side effects of cancer surgery

Side effects of cancer surgery may include the following:

Pain [4]. It is common to have some pain after any surgery. The amount and location of the pain depends on many factors, including where on the body you had surgery, how large the incision was, how much tissue was removed, and if you had pain before surgery. Pain after surgery lessens gradually as the body heals. In the meantime, your doctor may give you pain medications to decrease your discomfort.

Fatigue [5]. Many patients feel very tired after major surgery, especially when the surgery involves the abdomen or chest. This is due to a combination of factors, including the anesthesia, the body's tendency to divert energy to the site of the surgery to help with the healing process, the reduction in the amount of food eaten in the period immediately after the surgery, and the stress of the surgery. Fatigue usually goes away gradually, within two to four weeks after surgery.

Appetite loss [6]. Poor appetite after surgery is very common, especially when general anesthesia was used, and it may be associated with temporary weight loss. Most patients regain their appetite and return to their normal weight as the effects of the surgery wear off.

Swelling around the site of surgery. It is natural to experience some swelling after any surgical procedure. A surgical cut in the skin, also called an incision, is a form of injury to the body, and the body's natural response to injury is the inflammatory process, which results in swelling. Swelling occurs because fluid containing chemicals from white blood cells accumulates in the injured tissues to attack foreign substances. As the healing occurs after the surgical procedure, the swelling usually goes away.

Drainage from the site of surgery. Sometimes the fluid that accumulates at the surgery site drains through the surgical wound. If the drainage smells bad or is accompanied by a fever and redness, it may be a sign of infection, and you should contact your surgeon's office to have it evaluated.

Bruising around the site of surgery. After any surgical incision, there may be some leakage of blood from the small blood vessels under the skin. This can cause bruising, which is a common occurrence after a surgical procedure. However, if the bruising is accompanied by significant swelling, contact your surgeon's office to have it evaluated.

Bleeding [7]. In nearly every surgical procedure, there is some blood loss. Often, the blood loss is minimal, and it does not affect the normal function of the body. However, some surgical procedures commonly result in the loss of a larger amount of blood, and the surgical team may have blood available for transfusion if it is needed. Occasionally, you may experience some bleeding from the wound after a surgical procedure. If this occurs, cover it with a clean, dry dressing, and contact your surgeon's office. If there is a large amount of bleeding, it is helpful to apply pressure until you can be evaluated in your surgeon's office or the local emergency room.

Infection [8]. This may occur at the site of the incision, but it can also occur elsewhere in the body. Surgeons take great care to minimize the risk of infection during the operation, and your health care team will teach you how to prevent infection during recovery through proper care for yourself. Signs of infection in a surgical incision include redness, warmth, increased pain, and sometimes, drainage from the wound. If these signs occur, contact your surgical care team to have the wound evaluated. Antibiotics generally work well to treat most infections.

Lymphedema [9]. This is another common side effect that may occur after a lymph node dissection, which is the removal of lymph nodes. Lymph nodes are tiny, bean-shaped organs that help fight infection by filtering bacteria and other harmful substances from the lymph fluid, a colorless fluid containing white blood cells that travels through most tissues of the body. Sometimes, when the lymph nodes are removed, lymphatic fluid collects in the surrounding

tissues, causing them to swell. This swelling is called lymphedema, and it can result in discomfort and tightness. It can also limit the movement and function of the area affected, such as an arm or leg. You may need specific therapy to manage this side effect. Talk with your surgical care team about the risk of lymphedema before having any lymph nodes removed.

Organ dysfunction. Sometimes, cancer surgery in certain areas of the body, such as the abdomen or chest, may cause temporary problems with the organs in that area. For example, when surgery is performed in the abdomen, the intestine may become paralyzed for a short time, not allowing the food fluid and gas to pass through the bowels. This is called an ileus or [bowel obstruction](#) [10], and it can result in nausea and vomiting, stomach cramps, and bloating until the bowels begin to function again. Organ dysfunction after surgery is usually temporary, and it generally goes away as the healing process proceeds.

Other concerns after cancer surgery

Dietary concerns. During recovery, the body needs extra calories and protein for healing; however, eating your regular food may be difficult, depending on the location where the surgery was performed. The removal of any part of the mouth, throat, stomach, small intestine, colon, or rectum decreases appetite, limits the body's ability to absorb nutrients, or increases problems after eating, such as gas, cramping, or constipation. Some patients may have difficulty chewing or swallowing food. In addition, surgery for stomach cancer may affect the body's ability to absorb certain vitamins. Doctors usually prescribe vitamin supplements to help ease this problem. Some vitamin supplements can be given only by injection. Learn more about [nutrition recommendations during and after cancer treatment](#) [11].

Body image. Cancer surgery may change the way your body looks and feels and how it functions. Any surgery that changes how your body looks and functions can affect your body image. Some people may feel insecure about these changes and struggle with their [self-image](#) [12]. The [emotional side effects](#) [13] of cancer surgery are as important to treat as the physical side effects. Before cancer surgery, talk with your doctor about how it will affect your appearance and abilities and ask about options for reconstructive surgery or prostheses. Learn more about [surgery for specific types of cancer](#) [14].

You may also want to consider talking with a [counselor](#) [15] who can help you cope with these changes to your body. In addition, some patients find it helpful to join a [support group](#) [16] of other patients in similar situations.

Sexuality and Reproduction

Certain types of surgery may affect patients' [sexual and reproductive health](#) [17]. In particular, talk with your doctor before your surgery about how it may affect your fertility, which is a woman's ability to conceive a child or maintain a pregnancy and a man's ability to father a child. Learn more about fertility concerns and fertility preservation options [for women](#) [18] and [for men](#) [19].

In addition, depending on the location of the surgery, both men and women may experience sexual side effects. For example, men undergoing surgery for prostate, bladder, colorectal, or other types of cancer may experience changes in their sexual desire, production of semen, ability

to have an erection, or ability to ejaculate. Meanwhile, some gynecologic surgical procedures may cause sexual side effects, such as vaginal pain or dryness, in women. Many men and women experience a range of feelings after such surgeries, including loss, sadness, anxiety, or stress, all of which can affect sexual desire and intimacy. It is important to discuss the symptoms you experience with your doctor. Various options are available to help men and women manage the sexual problems from cancer and its treatment [17].

More Information

[How Cancer is Treated](#) [20]

[What is Cancer Surgery?](#) [21]

[What to Expect When Having Surgery](#) [22]

[Caring for the Symptoms of Cancer and its Treatment](#) [23]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/surgery/side-effects-surgery>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31921>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25259>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25048>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25043>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25243>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25256>

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[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25244>

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[21] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24720>

[22] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24462>

[23] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25282>