Cancer and Body Image

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Watch the Moving Forward video on Body Changes [2], adapted from this content.

Body image is how you feel about your appearance. Changes to your body image from cancer and its treatment also affect your self image, which includes how you see your personality, abilities, potential, values, and interests, as well as how you relate to others.

Common physical changes

Not all cancer treatments cause physical changes. However, some do, and these changes may be temporary or permanent. Physical changes associated with cancer and its treatment may include:

- Hair loss [3]
- Scars from surgery?
- Fatigue [4]
- Skin changes [5], including rashes and burns
- Swelling of the face, arms, or legs?
- Decreased physical skills, including athletic capabilities, balance, and agility?
- Weakness or loss of stamina?
- Loss of a body part
- Weight loss [6]
- Weight gain [7]?
- Changes in sexual function, such as infertility [8] (the inability to conceive a child), early menopause, loss of sexual interest, or erectile difficulties?

How physical changes affect body image

For many young adults, appearance and physical strengths and abilities are an important part of self image. When your appearance changes, or you aren?t able to do the things you once did, you may feel self-conscious. You may even feel insecure about physical changes that aren't as visible to others, including fatigue, hidden scars, infertility, or early menopause.

Even if cancer leaves no permanent physical changes, you may still feel different about your body after receiving cancer treatment. You may experience a loss of confidence in your body, seeing it as weak or vulnerable at a time when so many of your peers are in good health.

Coping with changes to your body

It is normal to feel sad, angry and distressed about changes to your body. Others feel anxious, depressed, scared, or even trapped. Here are several ways to cope:

- Before treatment begins, ask your doctor or another member of the health care team what body changes to expect, so you know what to expect and how to prepare. For example, if your treatment may cause hair loss, you may want to cut your hair shorter beforehand.
- Give yourself time to grieve physical losses and to adjust to your new body.?
- Talk with other young adults with cancer about how they coped with and adjusted to body changes. Joining a support group [9] is a good way to find others who share your experience.
- Be prepared for questions and comments about your appearance, and think about how you will respond. If you prefer not to talk about it, just

tell people it's a private matter.?

- Remember that, although your body may look and feel different, you are still the same person on the inside. Cancer does not take away your personality, interests, and talents. If anything, you may find an emerging talent or strength that you didn't know you possessed.?
- Take care of your body with exercise [10], good nutrition [11], and adequate sleep [12]. Be sure to ask your doctor whether you have any restrictions on your physical activity or diet.?
- Find a new activity that interests you if you are unable to do activities that you enjoyed before cancer treatment. Learning a new skill can help you regain confidence in your body.
- Ask for a referral to a physical therapist or fitness coach to help you manage any physical limitations, such as regaining balance or learning how to function with your changed body. Learn more about rehabilitation [13].?
- Let your doctors and nurses know about your concerns and questions so that they can assist you.
- If concerns about your physical appearance or physical activity limitations become overwhelming, or if insecurity about physical changes cause you to avoid people and situations you previously enjoyed, ask your doctor for a referral to a counselor [14] or an oncology social worker [15].

Although it seems contradictory, many young adults describe positive changes in their body image as a result of living with cancer. For example, you may gain a greater appreciation of your body?s resilience or discover that issues of weight or body shape matter less to you than they did before. You many see your scars as signs of courage and survival. Moreover, you may be newly inspired to make healthy lifestyle changes [16], such as eating better, exercising more, and finding ways to manage stress.

More Information

Look Good?Feel Better [17]

Sexual and Reproductive Health [18]

Coping With Cancer-Related Fatigue [19]

Cancer in Young Adults [20]

Additional Resource

LIVE**STRONG**: Body Image [21]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/multimedia/videos/young-adults-cancer/body-changes
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25251
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25260
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25263
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25262
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25268
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24996
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[20] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117
[21] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Body-Image