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Self-Image and Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2015

Self-image is how a person views himself or herself. Because of the many physical and emotional changes after a cancer diagnosis, people may experience positive and negative changes to their self-image.

Physical changes

Both cancer and its treatment may change how you look. How you feel about your appearance is called body image. Many people with cancer feel self-conscious about changes to their bodies. Some of the more common physical changes of cancer include:

- [Hair loss](#) [3]
- [Weight gain](#) [4] or [weight loss](#) [5]
- Surgery scars
- [Rash](#) [6], typically from drug therapies
- Loss of an organ, limb, or breast

- The need for an ostomy, which is a surgical opening that allows bodily waste to exit the body into a bag
- [Fatigue](#) [7] or loss of energy, which can cause you to give up activities you once enjoyed

Reconstructive surgery, prosthetic devices, and cosmetic solutions often help people cope with these types of physical changes. Talking with a friend or another person with cancer who has experienced similar changes may help you cope with changes to your body. Remember to share your concerns with a member of your health care team. And, ask for more information about ways to relieve these symptoms or the emotional discomfort from these changes to your body. Many of these changes will resolve or improve as time passes after treatment.

Emotional changes

Cancer disrupts so many parts of a person's life, from relationships to work and hobbies. Depending on the seriousness of the illness and the chance of recovery, it may also force you to make changes to your future and deal with the chance of dying. During this time, you may experience many different emotions, such as:

- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Loneliness or a sense of being different from others
- Fear
- [Anger](#) [8]
- Frustration
- [Guilt](#) [9]
- Feeling out of control
- A change in the way you think about yourself and the future.

However, many people with cancer have also reported positive changes, including:

- Appreciation for the strength of their bodies
- Peace
- Gratitude
- New important relationships with caregivers and other patients
- Awareness and appreciation that life is short and special
- A shift in priorities
- Clarity about meaning in life and personal goals.

Learn more about the [positive changes that occur after cancer](#) [10].

Coping with self-image changes

You may view yourself and your body differently after cancer. These tips may help you cope:

- Allow time to adjust. Accepting a cancer diagnosis and undergoing treatment may change your life. It takes time to adapt so treat yourself with compassion and kindness.
- Talk with others who have been in similar situations. Many times, having one-on-one conversations or attending [support groups](#) [11] with people who have been in the same situation can provide understanding and hope.
- Build a network of friends and family who can support you and help you feel positive.
- Ask for and accept help. Pass off tasks that take up your energy and aren't pleasing to you. Asking friends to babysit, hiring a housekeeper, or buying prepared meals helps free up time to focus on healing.

- Stay calm and, if you are able, [embrace humor](#) [12]. Laughter has many positive effects on the mind and body. And it may help you relax during an uncomfortable time.
- Let your health care team know your worries and concerns. For instance, if you are worried about losing your hair during treatment, you may consider cutting it very short or even shaving it. Taking control over the process may help you feel less scared.
- As much as possible, [remain active](#) [13]. Physical activity creates energy and may help you feel better during treatment. Social activities can also help you focus on something other than cancer.
- [Seek counseling](#) [14] if you need professional support. A professional can help you cope with and understand confusing feelings and deal with physical changes.

More Information

[Online Communities for Support](#) [15]

Moving Forward Video: [Body Changes](#) [16]

[The Power of Writing](#) [17]

Additional Resources

[LiveSTRONG Foundation: Body Image](#) [18]

[Look Good...Feel Better](#) [19]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/managing-emotions/self-image-and-cancer>

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25251>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25262>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25263>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25260>

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

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24489>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24491>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24649>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30901>

[13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24996>

[14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[15] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[16] <http://www.cancer.net/node/28081>

[17] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31561>

[18] <http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/emotional-and-physical-effects-of-treatment/body-image/>

[19] <http://lookgoodfeelbetter.org/>