

Health and wellbeing

Health information after cancer treatment as a child or teenager

The purpose of this factsheet is to tell you about long-term side effects (called 'late effects') that can happen after having cancer treatment. They can happen soon after treatment finished or later in life. The medical team at the hospital where you received your treatment or your long-term follow-up team will be able to help you with specific information about which late effects are relevant to you.

Why do I need to keep healthy?

Making healthy lifestyle choices is very important for people who have survived cancer. We know that treatment given for cancer can sometimes affect your health later in life. This factsheet gives you information on what can help lessen these effects and how you can introduce them into your daily routine.

Why should I eat well?

A balanced diet will help your body and mind stay healthy - you really are what you eat! It's recommended that you drink lots of water and eat three meals every day that include a variety of fresh foods. There are many sources of information to help you think about what you eat and how to cook your meals on a budget.

Fresh is best as ready meals are often full of sugar, salt and artificial ingredients. Cooking your meals using fresh meat, fruit and vegetables can not only be enjoyable, tasty and cheap, but it will also give your body the nutrients that it needs to fight infections and disease.

Don't forget to look at the ingredients in your drinks too. There are often hidden sugars in drinks which contribute to weight gain and can also affect your teeth. Your GP can help you with healthy eating advice and there is lots of online information to help too:

www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well

www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/food-facts

Why should I keep active?

Being active helps you maintain a healthy weight and is good for your bones and joints. Some people may have pain in their joints or have slightly weaker bones following their cancer treatment.

Physical activity is good for everyone and there are lots of ways to be active which don't have to involve going to the gym or running marathons. Activities such as walking up the stairs, gym classes, dancing, playing sports, swimming or taking the dog for a walk are all good for your health.

When you move more, it not only helps your bones and joints but also helps your brain to release feel-good hormones that can help you feel more positive.

Going for daily walks is a great starting point and you can slowly build up to more vigorous exercise if you want to. There are lots of websites to help you get started and you can talk to your follow-up team or your GP to find out which activities are safe for you to do. They might even be able to refer you to exercise programmes or other teams that would be happy to help.

www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/here-help/health-tools/exercise-calorie-calculator

www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active

Why should I be careful in the sun?

Healthy sun exposure can boost your Vitamin D levels, which is important for your bones and general mood. It is important to stay safe in the sun by using sunscreen, wearing a hat and t-shirt and limiting your exposure during the peak hours.

However, it is not safe for anyone to stay in the sun for too long, particularly if you have already been treated for cancer. Avoid using sunbeds as this greatly increases your risk of developing skin cancers.

For further information, see CCLG late effects factsheet - skin and sun protection.

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Why do I need to see my dentist regularly?

Cancer treatment can lead to dental problems in the future so looking after your teeth is important. Brush your teeth twice a day and make sure you visit your dentist at least once a year. Your dentist will identify any treatment or extra care that you may need to consider. For further information, see CCLG late effects factsheet - Oral health: teeth and mouth.

Can I drink alcohol?

National guidelines state that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption. Men and women are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol per week – 6 glasses of wine or 6 pints of beer per week.

Your liver gets rid of toxins in your body and it had to work very hard during your cancer treatment so your body could cope with toxins such as chemotherapy. Alcohol is also a toxin and so excessive alcohol, especially binge drinking, can put your liver under more stress, which can lead to liver damage and can also cause cancer. Alcohol is also classed as a drug and can have consequences on your mental health including addiction and depression.

To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level, it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week spread evenly across the seven days.

6 (175ml) glasses of 13% wine:



6 (568ml) pints of 4% lager or ale:



5 (568ml) pints of 4.5% cider:



14 (25ml) glasses of 40% spirits:



Data taken from Drinkaware (2022)

www.drinkaware.co.uk - advice and support, facts and tools to help drink sensibly

Can I smoke, vape or take drugs?

Smoking is bad for everyone but especially if you have already had a significant health issue like cancer. If you smoke, expect to be asked about whether you want to stop each time you come for your check up with any healthcare professional.

Smoking increases your chances of getting other cancers in the future, not to mention the fact that it causes your breath to smell and can cause yellowing of your teeth. It also increases your risk of heart and other vascular diseases causing potentially serious problems such as a stroke.

www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking

You should also avoid being exposed to cigarette smoke from someone else. People who are regularly exposed to passive smoking are at risk of developing the same diseases as smokers, such as cancer and heart disease.

www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/passive-smoking-protect-your-family-and-friends

You should also avoid vaping/e-cigarettes as these contain nicotine and many other chemicals which can increase your risk of developing lung disease, asthma and heart disease in the future.

You should avoid taking recreational drugs as they can have a negative effect on your physical and mental wellbeing.

www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/drugs-and-alcohol

www.talktofrank.com

Your follow-up team or GP can work with you and offer you support, guidance and medication to try and stop smoking, vaping or taking recreational drugs.

What about sex and pregnancy?

It is essential to practice safe sex to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If you use a condom, you will reduce your chances of contracting viruses that can then lead to cancers. You may also have been told that your treatment has affected your chances of having children, but until this has been confirmed by a doctor, you must also assume that unprotected sex could lead to pregnancy. For further information, see CCLG late effects factsheets - female and male reproductive health.

www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/sex-activities-and-risk

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Why do I need follow-up tests?

Some of your cancer treatment may affect your future health and your follow-up team will advise you on what screening tests you need depending on your medical history. This makes sure that any problems are identified as early as possible when they may be easier to treat. Ignoring these problems won't make them go away and can sometimes mean more treatment for longer.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-screening

Why should I examine myself?

Most young adults who have been successfully treated for cancer go on to live healthy lives but there is always a possible risk of developing a further cancer in the future. Knowing your own body is important and we encourage everyone to examine themselves regularly. This includes checking your skin, breasts or testicles for any changes, lumps or bumps. Detecting changes early can improve the chances of successful treatment. The follow-up team will advise you on how to do this but you can also visit the website below for more information. If you do spot any changes or are worried then please see your GP.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer/symptoms

Emotional impact

Receiving a cancer diagnosis and being treated for cancer as a child or young person is often scary and can be traumatic. After treatment, it is common to feel different and you may feel relieved but also sad, angry, lonely, or uncertain.

You may find yourself worrying about lots of different things:

- fear of your cancer returning
- coping with physical changes to your body
- dealing with changes in relationships
- concerns about being treated differently in the workplace or college
- worries about the future such as starting a family

These are normal but difficult feelings to process, and it can take time to adjust to life after treatment.

Sometimes, the emotional impact of having gone through the cancer experience can hit a few weeks, months or even years later, particularly during times of stress. Research has shown that children and young people who have been diagnosed and treated for cancer may be at increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Everyone has bad days, but if your feelings are becoming stronger, you feel more anxious or you are struggling to cope with each day, then it might help to talk to someone who can support you such as your hospital psychology team, GP, or a counsellor. It is important to talk to someone you trust, and your follow-up nurse, so that they know how you feel and can help you.

If you feel overwhelmed by your feelings, it is important to not struggle on your own. Talking to a friend or family member can help and there is also extra help and support available out there.

www.nhs.uk/mental-health/

www.youngminds.org.uk/

