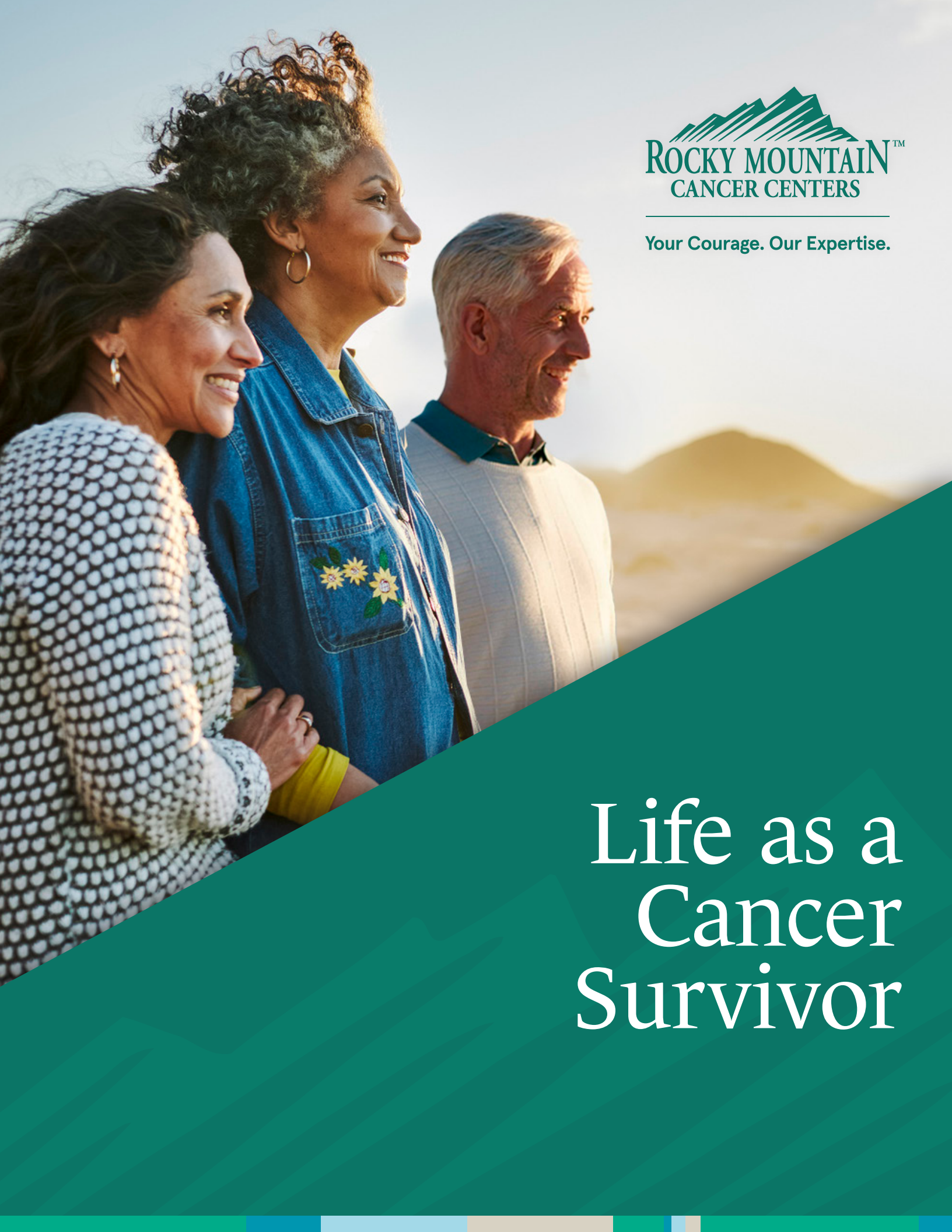




Your Courage. Our Expertise.

A photograph of three people—two women and one man—standing in profile, smiling and looking out over a mountain landscape. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a white and black patterned jacket. The woman in the middle has curly hair and is wearing a blue denim jacket with yellow floral embroidery. The man on the right has grey hair and is wearing a light-colored sweater. The background shows a hazy mountain range under a soft, golden light. A large teal diagonal shape covers the bottom right portion of the image, containing the title text.

Life as a Cancer Survivor



What's Next After Beating Cancer?

As a cancer survivor, it's important to recognize that survivorship goes much deeper than simply completing cancer treatment. You were faced with, and pushed through, unique circumstances that challenged you physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, coming out on the other side. And, even if you're not quite feeling like your old self, you are an inspiration to those around you. You're living proof that cancer patients can become cancer survivors who live lives that are active, full, and healthy.

Starting out, it's understandable that you might feel overwhelmed when thinking about what comes next—what you'd like to do with family and friends, your responsibilities, and your future. There might even be times when you question what you can or should be doing as a cancer survivor, as well as what you should avoid. And, of course, you might be concerned about cancer recurrence.

Adjusting to the New Normal of Cancer Survivorship

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers (RMCC), we understand that transitioning from cancer patient to cancer survivor can be quite an adjustment.

During treatment, your RMCC cancer care team was there with you, making it much more convenient to ask questions about how you're feeling and what's normal. Now that treatment is over, these opportunities are less frequent, which could leave you feeling anxious as you adapt to what your new "normal" should feel like. If you start to feel different or have new side effects, we encourage you to reach out to your primary care physician or oncologist. We also encourage you to attend all of your follow-up appointments so we can keep an eye on both your mental and physical health.

Of course, the number one question on the minds of most every cancer survivor is: will my cancer come back? Unfortunately, there is no definite way of knowing this. Therefore, we hope you will focus less on the unknowns and more on practical concerns, such as:

- How will you transition back into your pre-cancer roles/responsibilities within the immediate family?
- Will you go back to your old job or find a new one? If so, will it be full-time or part-time?
- How will you deal with friends or co-workers who may not know exactly how to treat you?
- What can you do to make healthy choices regarding nutrition, physical activity, and mental health self-care a priority?
- What can you do to keep post-cancer depression and anxiety at bay?
- Are there any post-cancer financial concerns that I need to take care of? If so, how?



You Are Not Alone in Your Survivorship

Fortunately, there are many organizations and [resources](#) available to you and your family that can help you gain a better understanding about cancer survivorship:

- Consider joining a [support group](#) with other cancer survivors who can relate to what you are going through.
- Refer to your physician as the primary source of information related to your health. When you are looking for information about a condition or side effect, be sure to seek out reliable resources.
- Mentor another cancer patient by sharing what you've learned during your cancer journey. To learn more about how survivors can easily serve in this role, visit the [American Cancer Society website](#).

Remember, you are not alone in your survivorship.
We are here to help you prepare for this next chapter.

What Now?

Life as a Cancer Survivor

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Adapting to a New “Normal” At Work

If your cancer diagnosis came when you were employed, it may or may not have affected your ability to work while you received treatment.

While some patients are able to keep working, often finding it a welcome distraction from dealing with cancer, others need a break. For them, that may involve anything from taking a leave of absence to quitting altogether due to treatment itself or the side effects that can come along with it.

If you stepped away from work during cancer treatment and are ready to return, it's likely you are faced with feelings of uncertainty regarding how to proceed. You might be wondering how much you should share about what you are or have been going through as a cancer survivor, among other things.

Whether you are looking for a new job or re-entering the one you took a leave from, being a cancer survivor can come with its own set of challenges. There may be times that certain dilemmas arise, including:

- Is it necessary to inform your employer about your cancer diagnosis?
- Do you feel as though you can handle a full-time job, or should you start slower with a part-time position?
- Has your cancer journey changed your views regarding the type of job you want?
- Did any of your cancer journey experiences leave you with new skills that could make you more suited to a specific job?



Regardless of whether you are returning to your former job or starting over, there's no need to succumb to pressure if you truly aren't ready. Be sure to listen to your body, only proceeding at a speed that feels comfortable. Most importantly, remember that there's no shame in asking others to be patient with you as you adjust to your new normal.

Returning to Work After Cancer

While beating cancer is a major victory, there still might be certain things that leave you feeling a bit defeated—like returning to work. And understandably so. After all, it's likely some changes have occurred since you took a leave of absence, possibly resulting in a different atmosphere. Will your employer and/or your coworkers question your ability to perform at the level you did before your diagnosis? Will you be able to handle the same workload as you did pre-cancer? Are you confident in your decision to return to your old job or would it be better for you to start from scratch elsewhere?

Unfortunately, there is no guaranteed way to know how things will go. Because of this, we encourage you to prepare ahead of time. By doing so, you can make the transition back into the workplace setting a little smoother. And, since we at Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers want you to be able to step into

your job, old or new, confidently, we've compiled some things for you to consider before you schedule your return to work.

Be Realistic About Your Situation

Even if you *feel* mentally ready to return to work, it's important that you honestly determine if you're *actually* up for the challenge.

While your job might not be physically demanding, certain responsibilities—waking up at a certain time and being alert, responsive, and productive for several hours at a time—can be surprisingly draining. Additionally, it's rare to have a job that doesn't cause at least a little bit of stress. Therefore, it's important that you can honestly answer the question of whether you're ready for re-entering the world of deadlines, responsibilities, and expectations. As a cancer survivor, your most important "job" is taking care of yourself. Because of this, we at Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers encourage you to listen to your body and talk to your oncologist and your loved ones.

Returning to work can be a wonderful step in the right direction, but only if the time is right. Going back into the workforce without being physically and mentally prepared can have a negative impact on your health, which is the last thing you need. Remember, it's OK to take your time—you'll get to where you need to be once you are truly ready.

Pick a Manageable Back-to-Work Schedule

Even if you've gotten the approval of your oncologist to return to work, it doesn't mean you have to jump into a full-time schedule from the start. In fact, transitioning back to work is usually more successful when you ease into it. Remember, you didn't take a typical "break" from work. You were off fighting cancer, which likely took a toll on you both physically and emotionally. Before you embrace a 40-hour work week, take time to consider if that's what you're up for. You might find out that you're better off returning part-time—and that's okay. If your job description allows, you might even consider working from home for a while. Whatever choice you make, it's important to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that listening to your body and making adjustments as needed is what will set you up for success. Fatigue from cancer treatment can last for several months for some survivors, so be prepared for that.

Identify Any Special Accommodations You May Need

As a cancer survivor, your cancer treatment may have left you with some physical differences that may require some special accommodations in order to keep you comfortable at work. To identify what those are, it can help to make a list of what you know of or suspect you'll need to request in order to perform your best in the workplace. This might include:

- Will you need access to the restroom more often?
- Do you need a wheelchair or walker?
- Can a stool be provided if standing for a long period of time is difficult?
- Do you need to wear special apparel? This can be especially important to consider if your job requires you to wear a uniform.
- Are there any medication side effects your boss should be aware of?

Schedule a Call or Meeting with Your Supervisor

Last but definitely not least, take time to have an in-depth conversation with your supervisor before returning to work. Share your excitement to return and use this time to describe any special requirements you may need as well as time away from the job that may be required for follow up appointments, physical therapy, etc. Encourage them to ask questions and give answers that will help them better understand how your ability to work has been impacted by cancer treatment. Often, cancer survivors face challenges at work—but together, you can brainstorm solutions that can improve your office surroundings.



This discussion will help alleviate a huge source of anxiety you may feel as a cancer survivor preparing to return to work: fear of discrimination. Fortunately, most employers are reasonable and will probably be more than happy to welcome you back after cancer treatment is over. With that said, you should prepare yourself just in case you have an employer who is less than enthusiastic about your return due to the special accommodations you may need.

Hopefully Your Employer Will Give You Their Support

Worrying about how you'll be treated when you return after missing work for an extended period of time due to cancer treatment is only natural. Maybe you worry about the possibility of being penalized (directly or subtly) after your prolonged absence. Or, if you're able to return to work, but in a weakened or physically disabled state, you might be concerned regarding the physical logistics of navigating the workplace.

For this reason, certain laws have been set in place requiring employers to accommodate weakened or disabled employees. However, there are some gray areas regarding illness-related termination that you should be aware of. While federal law does require employers to make a reasonable effort to accommodate qualified job applicants or existing employees who have disabilities, the employer is not required to comply if he/she can prove that providing requested accommodations would create a hardship for the company (i.e., if complying with a request would endanger the company's financial ability to stay in business). Reasonable requests that employers must comply with typically include:

- Allowing an employee to transition to another open position within the company
- Making changes to make the workplace accessible to those with disabilities (enlarging doorways, installing ramps, etc.)
- Restructuring an employee's job so they can tolerate it better
- Allowing an employee to adjust their work schedule, including switching from full to part-time

The Law is On Your Side

As a cancer survivor, it's only natural that you are concerned about being fired for missing too much work or discriminated against as a result of your illness.



Thankfully, you have protection. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act and Rehabilitation Act, your employer cannot legally terminate or demote you for being ill as long as you are qualified and able to perform your job. Additionally, if you weren't working before your cancer diagnosis and decide to enter the workplace after being sick, it's illegal for potential employers to discriminate against you because you have or had cancer.

Should you need additional time off for extra treatment or symptom management after you return to work, the Family and Medical Leave Act provides protection for your job. Under this law, employees with serious illness can take up to 12 weeks off (all at once or spread out over time) and/or work part-time for a limited time.

Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee that your employer will welcome you back to work with open arms or that you'll land a job that's fully accommodating to your needs. For this reason, make sure to review the [American Cancer Society's Americans with Disabilities Act: Information for People Facing Cancer](#) to learn more about your rights as a cancer survivor. If you believe you've been discriminated against in a way that has caused you to lose your ability to make a living, we encourage you to schedule an appointment with an employment lawyer.

How to Tell Coworkers About Your Cancer Diagnosis

When it comes to your medical history and health concerns, only you can decide what you're comfortable sharing. At the time of your cancer diagnosis, you may have felt it was best to keep that information private rather than making it public knowledge among your coworkers. Now, as a cancer survivor ready to go back to work, you will once again need to determine how much personal information you want to share with others.

While keeping your cancer diagnosis a secret from coworkers is an option, it really isn't a practical one. After all, it's likely you'll look different when you return to work than you did when you left. Perhaps you're sporting a short new hairstyle or wearing a wig. Maybe you've lost a noticeable amount of weight. You might even be experiencing some lingering side effects from cancer treatment. Without providing some sort of an explanation for these physical changes, your coworkers will probably be concerned about your overall health. Once you finally do tell them, don't be surprised if they ask questions. It might seem overwhelming, but try to remember that it's mostly because they care!

Telling your coworkers about your cancer diagnosis is also a good way to clarify why you've been absent. Even if you didn't have to miss that much work, it's likely that your coworkers had to cover for you. Explaining to them that you missed work to undergo cancer treatments rather than missing work for vacation will allow them to feel much more gracious and understanding about temporarily taking on your workload.

Again, you are in control when it comes to how much information you divulge and how you approach these conversations. Sharing only the highlights is totally acceptable if you aren't comfortable with being completely transparent about your cancer journey. No matter what you choose to share, just remember that most of your coworkers, including your boss, will be most concerned about how you're doing physically and emotionally. At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers,

we understand that opening up about your cancer journey can be hard. So, to help make it easier, we've compiled some tips to get you started.

Determine What Information You're Comfortable Sharing

Are you comfortable discussing your medical issues openly? Or, do you prefer providing the bare minimum only?

Minimalist: Keep it short and sweet by simply saying you missed periods of work because you had cancer.

Somewhat open: Maybe mention that you missed work to undergo a few different types of treatment for breast cancer.

Pretty open: Talk about undergoing chemotherapy and mastectomy to treat your breast cancer. You might even provide more detailed information regarding the medicines you took, since there might be a coworker who can relate to a similar experience.

Regardless of how much you share about your situation, it's important that you set boundaries if needed. It should be obvious to the person on the receiving end as to whether or not this topic can be discussed more at a later time.

Anticipate Questions You Don't Want to Answer

Naturally, you'll have curious coworkers who would like more details—and while you may think that their questions seem too personal, try to maintain perspective. They probably do not mean to pry. Oftentimes, they just want to help or share stories about their loved one's cancer experiences. It's understandable, though, if hearing those stories makes you feel uncomfortable.

If they do, it's okay to explain that. Simply be honest by saying something like, "I know that many of us have had friends and family go through this. It's not easy. Hearing others' stories right now isn't really something I can handle at the moment, but maybe I'll be ready to talk more about this later on."

Sharing more with those you work most with will be especially helpful in times when you'll be out for things like follow-up visits with your doctor.



The good news is that most coworkers will respect your boundaries. However, if you encounter people who simply can't keep their curiosity to themselves, be ready with a response that will stop the conversation. Let them know that you'd prefer to change the subject. Or, be more direct, letting them know that sharing the details of your cancer diagnosis isn't something you're comfortable with.

Decide Who to Tell

If you prefer to only tell a small number of people at work about your cancer diagnosis, be sure to tell them to maintain your confidence. If you are being selective about who you tell, think about your reasons for sharing your story in the first place. Do you feel like you should explain why you were absent from work for such a long period of time? Are you experiencing long-term cancer treatment side effects that may affect your job performance? Would you like to put an end to rumors and speculation? Are you in need of emotional support? Do you simply want to be able to talk openly about your feelings? Answering these questions can be helpful when deciding which coworkers to tell.

Additionally, how much you share with coworkers typically depends on how closely you interact with them. People in another department won't need as much information as those who work closely with you. Sharing more with those you work most with will be especially helpful in times when you'll

be out for things like follow-up visits with your doctor. It's likely that you'll be more forthcoming with coworkers you've become friends with, which is understandable. For those you don't interact with very often, but who may notice your absence, a less-detailed explanation should suffice.

Decide How to Tell

If you are only sharing information about your diagnosis with a few select coworkers, you might feel more comfortable telling them one-on-one over lunch or within the privacy of your office. If it's a specific department or team you're telling, gathering them together so you can tell them all at once might be the best way to go. If you're telling your entire company, sending out an email may be the best option.

Remember, you are in control regarding how, when, where, why, and with whom you share your cancer experiences. There is no right or wrong way to go about it. There is only a way that is right for you. While you might not want to be the center of attention or treated differently, a little extra TLC during this adjustment period couldn't hurt. Don't be surprised to see patience and understanding from your coworkers (or even some extra help here and there). Take it all in stride and don't be afraid to accept help if it's something you could benefit from.



The Effects of Cancer on Family Life

When it comes to a cancer diagnosis, both you and the important people in your life are affected. Even after treatment ends, the emotional and physical changes cancer leaves behind can cause a ripple effect that can be felt by the entire family.

One common concern that family members of cancer patients have is, “Will I get cancer, too?” Certain types of cancer, such as breast, ovarian, endometrial, pancreatic, colorectal, and prostate cancers, can increase the risk for blood relatives of cancer survivors. Genetic counseling can help assess this risk for family members.

Another concern among couples of child-bearing age is, “Will we be able to conceive a child?” Again, the answer varies. It’s likely that your oncologist has talked with you about fertility, including how it can be affected by treatment and the preservation methods available should you one day want to start a family. If that’s the case, you may have preserved eggs or sperm in advance and you and your partner will need to discuss how to proceed. If you didn’t address fertility before treatment, trying to conceive a child could leave you feeling stressed and anxious.

Whether you want to conceive a child or not, you and your partner may have concerns about sex and intimacy. You both may question when, or even if, it’s okay to be sexually active. There are times when cancers and cancer treatments do impact sexual function. Because of this, you might sometimes feel self-conscious about your body image and your partner may worry about causing you discomfort.

Remember, having these questions and concerns is completely normal. The good news is that with time and open communication, you and your family will find yourselves focused less on cancer and more on enjoying normal life together.



Who Should Get Genetic Testing?

As a cancer survivor, it's likely some new or different concerns are on your mind these days, including how your cancer diagnosis might affect your family members in regards to their own cancer risk. While it might seem logical to encourage your blood relatives to undergo genetic testing, it's important to understand that genetic testing is only helpful in predicting cancer in a small percentage of individuals.

When It Comes to Cancer Risk, Lifestyle Trumps Genetics

Most cancer diagnoses aren't related to genetics but genetic testing can be very beneficial when deciding on a treatment option for cancer patients. Only 5% to 10% of cancers are related to genetics, according to experts. Additionally, only certain types of cancers like prostate cancer, colorectal cancer, pancreatic cancer, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and endometrial cancer are more likely to be hereditary. Considering all the types of cancers there are, that's actually very good news! While you have no control over your genetics, you most certainly do have control over the lifestyle factors (unhealthy eating habits, lack of exercise, smoking, overindulging in alcohol, excess sun exposure) that increase your cancer risks. For certain individuals, though, genetic testing can be very helpful.

When Is Genetic Testing for Cancer a Good Idea?

Undergoing genetic testing is not a decision that should be taken lightly, but rather one that requires careful consideration. Before making a final decision about genetic testing, it's wise to create a family cancer history map that lays out the cancer histories of as many first-degree (parents, siblings, and children) and second-degree (grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews) relatives as possible. Genetic testing may be beneficial if one or more first- or second-degree relatives has been diagnosed with:

- A genetic mutation such as BRCA1 or BRCA2
- The same type of cancer that you have been diagnosed with
- A cancer diagnosis when under the age of 50
- More than 20 colon polyps
- Ovarian cancer, regardless of age
- Cancer in a pair of organs, such as in both breasts or both kidneys
- Rare cancers including sarcoma or male breast cancer
- Two or more different types of cancer that have occurred independently in the same person

There are other genetic risk factors that should also be taken into consideration. These include certain ethnic predispositions, specifically Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry and/or having three or more relatives who have developed ovarian cancer, breast cancer, pancreatic cancer, and/or aggressive prostate cancer.

If any red flags are present among your family history, it's likely that your doctor will encourage you to meet with a genetic counselor for genetic counseling. A genetic counselor is a trained professional who will be able to further pinpoint the odds of having a genetic mutation that raises the risk of certain types of cancers. The findings of the genetic counselor are what will determine whether or not you are a good candidate for genetic testing.



When it comes to genetic testing, only you can make the final decision as to whether it's right for you.

The Results of Genetic Testing Can Trigger Strong Emotions

When it comes to genetic testing, only you can make the final decision as to whether it's right for you. Even if you or your loved ones fit the criteria for genetic testing, you don't have to go forward with it. After all, answers can be a good thing, but they can also be potentially life-changing. Because of this, it's a good idea to consider and prepare for the "what-ifs" before you pursue it. Additionally, should you discover that you're at increased risk of developing cancer, that may mean your close relatives have the same risk. Therefore, before undergoing testing, it may be a good idea to have a talk with your close relatives to see if they want to know the results (since the results could affect them, too).

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we understand that finding out that you are at an increased risk of developing cancer can be scary. However, having that bit of knowledge may empower you to be proactive in ways that will reduce your risk (such as preventive mastectomies to reduce the risk of breast cancer). Furthermore, being at an increased risk for cancer doesn't mean you will definitely develop it.

If you would like to learn more about whether or not genetic testing is right for you and your loved ones, we encourage you to visit our [Genetic Testing FAQs](#).

Future Fertility for Cancer Survivors

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we understand that thinking about how cancer may affect your fertility can be scary. Because of this, it's likely you had a conversation regarding this topic with your oncologist prior to starting cancer treatment. Not only did you talk about your future ability to have children in general, you probably also talked about ways to preserve your fertility if conceiving children after treatment was something you wanted to try to do.

Now that your cancer treatment has ended, you might feel ready to start or grow your family. But as excited as you are, you might also feel nervous about the unknowns. To help put your mind at ease, we've compiled some of the most common questions cancer survivors have as they consider expanding their families. Keep in mind that fertility often depends on the type of cancer you had as well as the type of treatment you received. Therefore, the most accurate answers will come from your RMCC cancer care team as they will better understand your current situation.

Common Survivor Concerns About Post-Cancer Fertility

Will I be able to conceive a child after cancer treatment?

Various factors including the type of cancer you had, the treatments you received, and how your body responded will determine the answer to this question.

Women

Chemotherapy: Certain types of chemotherapy can cause egg damage and infertility. [View the list on the American Cancer Society website.](#)

Various chemotherapy drugs can also lead to a weakened heart, which could result in a dangerous pregnancy or early menopause (the absence of menstrual period which causes permanent infertility).

Radiation therapy: A woman's ability to become pregnant after treatment can be reduced by both internal (brachytherapy) and external radiation given to organs such as the abdomen, ovaries, uterus, pelvis, lower spine, and pituitary gland.

Surgery: Surgical removal of all or part of the uterus, cervix, one or both ovaries, or pelvic lymph nodes can make it difficult for a woman to become pregnant or carry a pregnancy to term.

Men

Radiation therapy or chemotherapy can cause a reduced sperm count. In some cases, sperm production returns to normal over time (usually 10 to 24 months after treatment). In other cases, reduced sperm count can be permanent.

Surgical removal of organs such as the bladder, prostate, one or both testicles, or pelvic lymph nodes may cause infertility in men.

How long should I wait after cancer treatment before trying to get pregnant?

As long as your oncologist feels as though you are ready, you are free to proceed with trying to get pregnant. With that said, there are times when waiting will be recommended. For example, men are often advised by their oncologist to wait 2 to 5 years after cancer treatment before trying to conceive a child naturally since cancer treatment can damage the DNA of sperm. Concerns regarding cancer treatments increasing the risk of conceiving a child with birth defects often weigh on the minds of survivors. Research, however, has found no increase in the rates of birth defects in children conceived by a parent who has undergone cancer treatment.

For women, most oncologists recommend waiting at least 6 months from the date of their final chemotherapy to try and get pregnant. That is because this is about how long it takes for eggs damaged during cancer treatment to leave the body. There are times, however, when oncologists recommend waiting up to 5 years after finishing cancer treatment to conceive a child. This is typically influenced by whether there are hormone therapies or other treatments required after chemotherapy and radiation therapy is complete.

Can cancer be passed along to a new baby?

Currently, there is no evidence that a child is at an increased risk of cancer simply because they were conceived after a parent had cancer treatment. However, some cancers are hereditary, which means there may be an increased risk that your child will develop that cancer during their lifetime depending on the type of cancer you had. Keep in mind that this does not guarantee that your baby would develop cancer, it simply means his or her risk may be higher than that of the general public. Breast, ovarian, colorectal, and prostate cancers are cancers known to be passed down through generations. If you were diagnosed with one of these cancers, we encourage you to speak with your oncologist about genetic testing and counseling.

Parenthood is Still Possible Regardless of Your Post-Cancer Fertility

If cancer treatment left you infertile and you did not take steps or know you could have taken steps to preserve your fertility before treatment (such as freezing your eggs or sperm) there are still several ways to become a parent. Thanks to donor eggs, donor sperm, surrogates who will carry your fertilized embryo to term, adoption, etc., you can still have the family you've dreamed of, even if your journey to parenthood isn't quite what you had envisioned.

Sexuality and Intimacy After Cancer

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we understand that moving forward after cancer treatment isn't easy. In fact, for many patients, it will require some adjustments. Rather than worrying about cancer, there will be new concerns, which may include going back to work, reminding yourself that you can return to old activities, and even accepting the fact that you're no longer "sick." Another very real issue cancer survivors face is sexual intimacy. In fact, according to one poll conducted by LIVESTRONG, nearly 60% of cancer survivors report experiencing sexual dysfunction after treatment. Long-term concerns regarding physical intimacy were also reported among as many as 85% to 90% of cancer survivors who were treated for prostate, breast, and gynecologic cancer.

Common Emotional Concerns Regarding Sex after Cancer

Oftentimes, sexual concerns after cancer affect cancer survivors both mentally and physically. Emotionally, both partners may experience nervousness for many reasons, which is completely understandable. After all, one of them just went through a serious illness.

A survivor's partner may worry that they are pressuring or causing physical pain to his or her partner.

A survivor may have concerns that his or her partner may no longer find their body attractive if it has been changed by cancer. These “body image issues” involve your mind (how you now feel about your body) and your body (your new physical appearance).

Physically, there may be concerns from both parties about whether they’ll be able to achieve orgasm due to a lowered sex drive. And, now that the patient/caregiver relationship is no longer needed, it may take time to adjust back into a romantic partner relationship.

Physical Symptoms of Sexual Dysfunction

The good news is that not all cancers and their treatments are associated with specific symptoms of sexual dysfunction. With that said, some do, so it’s a good idea to have an idea of what to expect. While the following symptoms do not affect all survivors, they are considered fairly common. Fortunately, many of these symptoms will eventually go away.

Breast Cancer

- Loss of sensation, fatigue, and symptoms related to reconstructive surgery (such as feeling discomfort while getting used to implants) may be experienced by those who had a mastectomy (removal of one or both breasts)
- Decreased sensation in their breasts and nipples, and lymphedema may be experienced by patients who underwent a lumpectomy
- Treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, or hormone therapy could cause patients to experience menopausal symptoms (mood swings, vaginal dryness, vaginal atrophy, and lowered libido or sex drive), fatigue, increased scarring, and lymphedema

Prostate Cancer

- Surgery for prostate cancer may cause patients to experience erectile dysfunction (ED) (inability to achieve or maintain an erection), difficulty climaxing, dry orgasm, and decreased libido

- Prostate cancer patients who received hormone treatments may experience ED, lowered libido, hot flashes, and gynecomastia (growth of breast tissue)

Colorectal Cancer

Bowel/bladder changes and complications associated with ostomies/stoma could be experienced by colorectal patients who receive surgery and/or radiation therapy

Gynecologic Cancers: Including Ovarian, Cervical, Vulvar Cancers, or Endometrial (Uterine)

- Gynecologic cancer patients who receive chemotherapy or radiation may experience fatigue, low libido, menopausal symptoms, increased scarring, and bowel/bladder issues
- Patients who have a hysterectomy might experience loss of sensation, menopausal symptoms, fatigue, lymphedema in lower extremities, and/or prolapse (when the uterus, bladder, vagina, or surrounding structures begin to fall out of their normal positions)

Talking About It is Important

If you’d like to achieve a healthy and fulfilling sex life after cancer, it’s important that you talk with your partner openly and honestly. The sooner you share your anxieties and fears with your partner the sooner you’ll be on the path toward restoring a sex life that is mutually satisfying. In addition to being healthy, having a discussion is the only way to truly resolve issues. And, a lot of times, couples discover that what they feared most was all in their head.

Still, it can be difficult at times to talk about intimacy. If you find yourself in a situation like this, you might consider individual and/or couples counseling, which can help you work through your concerns. If you’re experiencing anxiety surrounding your sex life, know that you can also talk with your RMCC oncology team or another healthcare provider. They will most likely be able to recommend therapists, and tools and techniques to improve your libido and sexual function.

Ways To Improve Sexual Desire and Function

As you navigate through this new territory, we encourage you to keep in mind that physical symptoms, emotions, and relationships look different among cancer patients. There is no one-size-fits-all regimen for getting your sex life back on track after cancer. With that said, there are some suggestions to consider:

- Get enough solid sleep
- Exercise regularly (get the OK from your oncologist)
- Find ways to relax
- Try to improve your self-acceptance and self-confidence (your partner found you attractive before cancer and may find you even more attractive as a survivor)
- Ask your doctor if any of your medications may be causing side effects that are inhibiting you sexually
- Consider therapy or medication if you have anxiety/depression
- Experiment with different sexual positions and/or sexual aids
- Ask your doctor about estrogen as a possible remedy for vaginal symptoms
- Strengthen pelvic muscles by practicing pelvic floor (Kegel) exercises
- Use lubricants during intercourse for short-term relief from vaginal dryness
- Use vaginal moisturizers daily for long-term relief from vaginal dryness

Remember, adjusting to life after cancer takes time. This cancer journey has been a trial for you and your partner, but you've endured and made it through! Do all you can to enjoy life and rediscover the things you pumped the brakes on during cancer treatment, including intimacy. Be sure to communicate regularly, remain patient, and show empathy toward each other. And, if needed, consider getting professional help. There are many important components of your overall health and quality of life as a cancer survivor and your sexual health is one of them!

Be sure to
communicate
regularly, remain
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empathy toward
each other.





Nutrition and Exercise Overview

When it comes to physical and mental health, [eating the right foods](#) and getting enough exercise are two of the most important things anyone can do. This is especially true for cancer survivors.

Achieving and Maintaining a Healthy Weight is Important

Gaining Weight After Cancer Treatment

A common side effect of cancer is weight loss. Certain cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation can result in nausea, a loss of appetite, or dry mouth—all of which make it hard to swallow food. The taste and smell of food may have also changed, causing people to have an aversion to foods they once enjoyed. Because of this, gaining weight back after treatment can be a challenge for many people.

Losing Weight After Cancer Treatment

While some patients need to regain weight after cancer treatment, others may focus on losing weight. There are various reasons weight gain occurs in cancer patients, including medications, stress eating, lack of exercise due to treatment, or something different altogether.

If your cancer treatment left you overweight or underweight, it's important to do all you can to get back to a healthy weight.

Diet and Exercise Affect Your Weight, and Much More

Foods for Cancer Survivors

You've probably heard the expression, "You are what you eat." But, did you know that it's actually true? As a cancer survivor, now, more than ever is the perfect time to assess whether your diet and exercise habits will keep you on a healthy path. What foods are stocked in your pantry and refrigerator? Does the amount of processed food outweigh the amount of fresh food? Is the fridge lacking because you eat out often? If so, it may be time to re-evaluate your habits. A great place to start is by enlisting the help of your cancer care team. Consider asking them to recommend a nutritionist to help you get on track. Keep in mind that it can take a while to adjust your diet habits. Keep pushing forward one step at a time until you are eating a balanced diet that is not filled with convenience or over-processed foods.



Exercise is incredibly beneficial for cancer survivors.



Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

Exercise is also incredibly beneficial for cancer survivors. If exercise isn't something you usually make time for, now is the perfect time to start. The good news is that you can do this in stages, adding a little activity at a time. While you can certainly go to the gym, you don't have to. There are plenty of other activities that count as exercise, including taking a walk in the park, lifting light weights at home, or going on a bike ride. The goal is to be consistent, making time for this several days of the week. A good way to help you succeed is to focus on activities you actually enjoy!

How to Live a Healthy Life After Cancer

If you talk with a cancer survivor, you might hear them say that they view their life in three different stages: life before diagnosis, life during treatment, and life after cancer. And while cancer is certainly no walk in the park, there might be a positive worth shedding light on, which is that cancer survivors tend to value and appreciate their health more than those who have never been seriously ill.

Oftentimes, this outlook is what causes survivors to put extra focus on making healthier lifestyle choices that can reduce the likelihood of getting cancer again—or any other serious illness for that matter.

Lifestyle Choices Can Influence Your Health

What you might not realize is that the steps for living a healthy lifestyle as a cancer survivor are essentially the same steps that anyone can take to improve their well-being—serious illness or not. Wise lifestyle choices can include:

Exercising regularly. Staying physically active can give a major physical and mental boost. Even low-impact activities, such as walking, can influence your present and future health for the better.

Eating healthier foods. "You are what you eat" is a well-known saying for a reason. Unlike processed, packaged, and high-sugar foods that have been proven to contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and unhealthy cholesterol and triglyceride levels, a diet rich with healthy foods (vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean proteins) will leave you healthier.

Ceasing tobacco use. Time and time again, it has been proven that smoking and chewing tobacco are harmful to your health. Tobacco or vaping simply don't fit into a healthy lifestyle.

Watching alcohol consumption. Overindulging in alcohol isn't healthy for anyone. So, if you do choose to drink, do so in moderation. According to

the American Cancer Society, women should limit themselves to no more than one drink per day, and no more than two for men.

Limiting sun exposure. Long-term and/or excessive sun exposure is known to cause skin cancer. One of the best ways to protect yourself is to stay inside during the heat of the day (between the hours of 10 am and 4 pm) when the sun's rays are strongest. It's also a good idea to cover your skin with a broad-spectrum sunscreen of at least SPF 15 that shields out both UVA and UVB rays.

Taking your prescription medication. If you have been prescribed medicine, it is important that you take it as directed and refill your prescriptions in a timely fashion. Even if you "feel fine," it is never wise to discontinue a prescription medication without getting an approval from your doctor.

Visiting your doctor for regular checkups. We encourage you to see your doctor as soon as possible if you become ill or have concerning symptoms. The sooner the cause is detected and diagnosed, the sooner treatment can begin.

Showing up for your regular cancer screening schedules. Beating cancer doesn't mean you should stop getting screened. Staying faithful to appointments can help catch any issues like a recurrence or a new type of cancer, making it possible to treat it sooner.

Cancer Survivors Need Healthy Habits

While anyone can benefit from living a healthier lifestyle, it is especially critical for cancer survivors. According to the American Cancer Society, survivors of many cancers, such as breast cancer and skin cancer, are at an increased risk of developing a second cancer or having a cancer recurrence.

Many cancer survivors come to realize that leading a healthy lifestyle after cancer takes work—but by being diligent in creating healthier routines, it can be done. If your pre-cancer life involved unhealthy habits, such as being physically inactive, frequently eating fast food, consuming too much alcohol, working to maintain your tan, etc. now, more than ever, is the time to incorporate change. As a survivor,

you've entered that third stage of life that can (and should) be the beginning of a new, healthier you.

As you transition to a healthier lifestyle, be sure to remember that you don't have to do it alone! Talking with other survivors at a support group or asking family and friends for their help are great ways to stay motivated and hold yourself accountable for the choices you make regarding your health. Not only is that good for you, but they'll also benefit from it, too!

Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

Now that cancer treatment is over, it's likely that your Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers' oncology team will suggest adding physical activity to your routine or maintaining what's already been recommended. How much and how often you should exercise will depend on various factors including the type of cancer treatments and surgeries you received, as well as any side effects that you may be experiencing.

As a cancer survivor, physical activity is very important. Exercise can help you:

- Reduce fatigue
- Boost your mood
- Regain your stamina and strength
- Maintain a healthy weight

In addition to these benefits, research shows that some cancer survivors can even reduce their risk of cancer recurrence by exercising. Furthermore, regular physical activity can help reduce the risk of developing other health conditions including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and even other types of cancer. As you move forward, it's important to remember that it's never too late to incorporate exercise into your daily routine for better health regardless of where you fall on the post-cancer spectrum.

As you can see, the importance of physical activity can greatly improve long-term treatment outcomes and quality of life among cancer survivors.

In Early Survivorship, Ask Your Doctor for Exercise Advice

Keep in mind that your treatment experience isn't necessarily going to be the same as another patient's. Because of this, the speed in which you start an exercise regimen will be dependent upon how you feel after a prolonged period of inactivity. This is why we encourage you to talk with your RMCC oncologist about what he or she thinks you can handle. Be sure to ask questions that are relevant to your status as a cancer survivor. Some questions might include:

- Are there certain exercises or activities that I should avoid?
- How often should I exercise and how long should each session last?
- Do I need to try to lose weight or gain it? If so, how much?
- What types of activities are safest and most beneficial for me?
- Should I focus on activities like strength training (lifting weights, yoga, sit-ups, push-ups) or cardiovascular exercise (walking, running, swimming, cycling)?
- Are there group exercise or cancer survivor exercise classes that I could join?

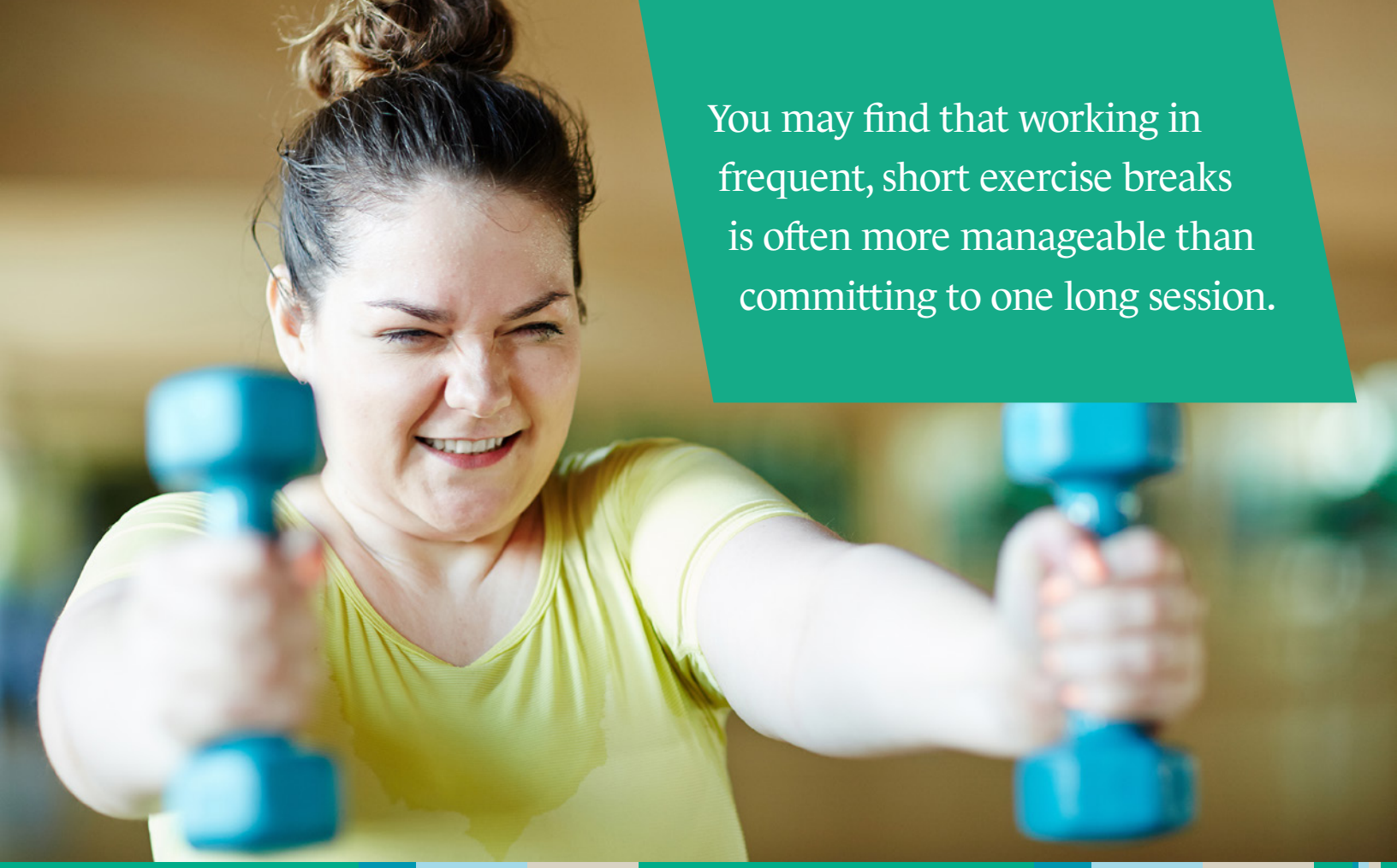
What to Consider As a Cancer Survivor When Adding in Exercise

We understand that it can be difficult to sort through the dos and don'ts of adding exercise into your routine. To make it easier, the American Cancer Society gathered important information on best practices regarding physical activities after cancer treatment from nutrition, physical activity, and survivorship experts. A group of physicians published these findings in *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*.

Key takeaways regarding physical activity for cancer survivors include:

- Avoid gyms and pools that are open to the public. Bacteria and viruses lurk in these areas and may be easily picked up for at least a few months after chemotherapy. This also applies to patients who have a low white blood cell count.
- How much stamina you have will depend on how you feel. When fatigued, aim for at least 10 minutes of light exercise but avoid overdoing it or pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion. On days you feel better, aim for a longer exercise time. Some survivors even find relief from fatigue by exercising more often.
- If you have nerve pain (neuropathy) or tingling in your hands or feet, you may feel off balance. If you find yourself in a situation such as this, consider riding a stationary bike or walking on a treadmill where you can hold on.
- Try to avoid chlorine exposure in a pool or too much sun from outdoor exercise if you have recently completed radiation therapy or have had a skin reaction to your radiation treatment.





You may find that working in frequent, short exercise breaks is often more manageable than committing to one long session.

Tips for Transitioning to an Active Lifestyle

Just because you know exercising is necessary to stay healthy and reduce the risk of cancer recurring, it doesn't mean committing to an exercise plan is easy. In fact, it can be a real challenge. To keep it from feeling like a burden, try making it fun. Not only will you benefit from the physical activity, you'll also be more enthusiastic about it if you enjoy it. Especially in your early days as a cancer survivor, any activity is helpful! Walking your dog or taking a walk with a friend, light stretching or yoga, taking a bike ride, even dancing around the living room with your grandchildren counts as exercise. As a general rule, The American Cancer Society recommends that cancer survivors should add exercise into their routine slowly, focusing on activities that are enjoyable. It is also recommended to eventually exercise for at least 150 minutes per week.

To keep from overdoing it, break up your exercise time into smaller, more manageable intervals. For example, exercise at home for three, equally-effective 10-minute stints rather than going to the gym for 30 minutes one day.

Additionally, if your RMCC oncologist has recommended that you incorporate both strength-building exercises (like lifting hand weights) and cardiovascular exercises (like walking or jogging) into your routine, you can alternate between the two types of exercise, which will allow your body to recover more quickly between workouts while keeping you from getting bored or burnt out with your exercise routine.

As you adjust to this new stage of your cancer survivorship, learn to embrace exercise to the best of your ability. Doing so will help you feel better and allow you to gain a greater appreciation for life. Eventually, exercise can once again become a natural, daily occurrence—one you might even enjoy!



Managing Post-Treatment Side Effects

Now that cancer treatment is over, it's likely your oncologist has told you that it's okay to resume activity—at least as much as you can handle. Still, you may find that some lingering side effects from cancer treatment keep you from doing so.

Ongoing Research Regarding Long-term Treatment Side Effects

Fortunately, there's good news. According to the National Cancer Institute, the cancer survival [rates have increased and will continue to do so](#), with an estimated 20.3 million survivors by 2026—an increase of 31% (more than 4 million survivors) over a 10-year period. This steady increase in cancer survival rates has made the survivors' quality of life an area of greater focus. Take [this study](#) conducted by the University of Australia, for example, where researchers analyzed the pharmaceutical records of nearly 4,000 prostate cancer survivors over the span of 11 years (2003–2014). The findings showed that survivors treated with a common prostate cancer therapy were at a higher risk of developing various conditions, such as diabetes, depression, high blood cholesterol (hyperlipidemia), osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, inflammatory/painful conditions, and gastric acid disorders post-treatment.

Yet another study concluded that survivors of gynecological cancer who had undergone radiation therapy experienced more urinary, gastrointestinal, and sexual side effects after cancer treatment than survivors who did not receive radiation therapy.

Because of this high interest regarding the side effects survivors can experience, more research is being conducted to better understand which treatments produce fewer side effects after treatment is over.

Side Effects that Cancer Survivors May Experience

Side effects vary among cancer survivors. While some people experience no side effects at all, others deal with long-term side effects. Long-term side effects of cancer treatment may include:

- Fatigue
- Brain fog
- Anxiety
- Sleeping disorders
- Dental disorders
- Osteoporosis
- Heart problems
- Sexual health issues

If you are experiencing any of these side effects or any type of pain, we encourage you to talk with your RMCC cancer care team. Our goal is to help in every way we can, including providing you with resources so you can connect with other survivors who understand what you are going through. With the right support, living with long-term side effects can become more manageable. With the right support, living with long-term side effects can become more manageable.

Managing Cancer Treatment Side Effects Survivors Experience

Unfortunately, side effects are a common occurrence for patients who undergo cancer treatment. In some cases, the side effects are considered “late side effects,” meaning they don’t occur until months or even years after treatment has ended. Other times, they are considered “long-term,” in that they were present during treatment but haven’t gone away now that treatment is over. As you move down the path toward recovery, your cancer care team and Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers will be right there with you, helping you better manage either type of side effect should you experience them.

With the right support, living with long-term side effects can become more manageable.

Late and Long-term Side Effects Survivors May Experience

As a cancer survivor, you may not be entirely free from residual effects of your illness. In fact, you may experience cancer or cancer-treatment-related side effects long after cancer treatment ends. The specific late- and long-term side effects that you may experience as a cancer survivor will depend on various factors such as:

- The type and location of the cancer you had
- Your family history
- Your age and physical condition during treatment
- Any non-cancer-related health problems you have
- The type(s) of cancer treatments you received, including dosages of medications and/or radiation

Late- and long-term side effects cover a broad spectrum. While some side effects are physical, others affect you emotionally. Examples of these side effects include:

- Fatigue
- Infertility and/or early menopause
- Anxiety, depression, and fear of recurrence
- Trouble breathing or other lung issues
- Digestive issues such as chronic heartburn, diarrhea, and constipation
- Brain changes, which could include memory loss and problems concentrating
- Hearing loss
- Vision issues, including dry eye, sensitivity to light, and trouble seeing at night

- Bone, joint, and tissue changes such as osteoporosis, joint pain, and loss of motion in joints, such as your jaw, shoulders, hips, or knees
- Heart problems, such as abnormal heart rhythm, high blood pressure, and heart muscle weakness
- Dental problems such as dry mouth, cavities, gum disease, or bone loss in the jaw
- Secondary cancers such as skin, breast, or thyroid cancers
- Growth, development, and hormonal problems (especially among prepubescent cancer survivors)
- Peripheral Neuropathy, a set of symptoms caused by damage to nerves that control the sensations and movements of our arms, legs, hands, and feet

Talking With Your Oncologist

As both a cancer patient and cancer survivor, it is very important that you have a conversation with your RMCC oncologist about what to expect regarding late- and long-term cancer treatment effects. The type of cancer treatment you received will play a big role in what you should keep an eye out for. We encourage you to consider scheduling an appointment very soon so you can discuss these things with your care team. Be sure to take notes or bring someone who can take notes for you.



We recommend keeping a detailed list of all of the cancer treatments and dosages you received in a safe place. Your RMCC cancer care team can provide that list for you upon request. Should you develop late side effects months or years down the road, this list can help your doctor provide a quicker diagnosis and treatment plan.

Other questions to consider asking your oncologist or cancer care team can include:

- Is there anything I can do to reduce the likelihood of developing these late side effects?
- Are there specific warning signs should I watch out for, and when should I see a doctor?
- Can you explain the differences between possible cancer or cancer-treatment “side effects” to watch for versus cancer “symptoms” that might indicate my cancer may have returned?
- Considering the cancer treatments I received, should I be monitored by any medical specialists (like an optometrist or cardiologist) who can watch for late side effects?

The New Normal for a Cancer Survivor

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we understand that cancer is a life-changing experience—one that can linger well into the future due to late- and long-term side effects. Again, we encourage you to have an open conversation with your cancer care team about what you might experience down the road. By doing so, you’ll be able to identify potential cancer treatment side effects so they can be checked out promptly by your doctor.



Fatigue After Cancer

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we know that not all cancer patients will experience the same thing when it comes to the side effects of cancer treatment. Some patients may experience hair loss while others won't. The same can be said when it comes to nausea and vomiting, as well as many other side effects. One side effect that most cancer patients and cancer survivors do share, however, is fatigue. It's the most common side effect of cancer treatment both during and after cancer treatment.

What is Fatigue?

For healthy people, fatigue is an extreme tiredness that can often be cured by taking a nap or getting a full night of restful sleep. For cancer patients and survivors, it's not so easy.

Ask any cancer patient or survivor to describe fatigue and you'll likely hear a definition that goes much deeper than simply feeling tired. For them, cancer-related fatigue usually doesn't disappear after sleep or rest. It can overtake the body differently than it does in a healthy individual. Cancer patients and survivors often describe their fatigue as feeling slow, weak, exhausted, and simply feeling a lack of physical and mental energy. And, unfortunately, this fatigue can be experienced at some level for months or even years after their cancer treatment ends.

Should You Be Concerned About Fatigue?

Surviving cancer can be both physically and emotionally exhausting. While fatigue is not a welcome side effect, it isn't one you should necessarily worry about. For many, it's considered more of a nuisance than anything else.

However, if left untreated, fatigue can have a huge impact on your quality of life. Once cancer treatment is over, you may be anxious to get back to your pre-cancer activities—but there may be times when fatigue holds you back. Fatigue may cause you to:

- Experience mood swings
- Sleep in longer or rest more often than usual
- Miss work
- Avoid attending social events
- Skip exercise
- Feel depressed and/or hopeless
- Spend less time with friends
- Shirk daily tasks such as cleaning your house, buying groceries, etc.

In other words, fatigue can prevent you from enjoying the fulfilling, post-cancer lifestyle you desire and deserve.



Treating Cancer-Related Fatigue

Anemia (when the blood circulating through the body does not have enough healthy red blood cells) is one main cause of post-cancer fatigue. Because of this, we encourage you to speak with your doctor about whether or not you should get a simple blood test for anemia. If you receive an anemia diagnosis, your doctor may recommend ways to treat your anemia, along with the fatigue. Treating anemia could involve:

- Including more iron-rich foods like leafy greens such as spinach, red meats, fish, and poultry into your diet
- Prescription medication that may increase the production of your body's red blood cells
- Getting a blood transfusion to increase the number of red blood cells in the body

In addition to treating the anemia, there are other ways to minimize the fatigue itself, including:

- Making adjustments to any pain medications you are taking
- Taking medication or participating in counseling to alleviate depression
- Adding exercise you can tolerate despite your low energy into your routine
- Getting into a regular sleep routine which includes:
 - Taking less naps during the daytime
 - Going to bed at a set time each night
 - Avoiding electronic stimulation for an hour before going to sleep

Remember, fatigue by itself is not a life-threatening effect of cancer treatment. However, it can have a negative effect on your daily quality of life. If you're experiencing post-cancer fatigue, please reach out to your RMCC oncologist or cancer care team for help.



Early Menopause as a Cancer Survivor

Even when it happens naturally, menopause can be a challenging transition, causing many women to wonder how much “the change” will affect their lives.

As a young woman with cancer, it can certainly be a shock to hear that your chemotherapy treatment could trigger early-onset menopause. There is already so much to deal with, and now this. Unfortunately, “chemopause,” as it’s known within the cancer community, is rarely common knowledge. In fact, most women don’t learn about it until they begin to discuss their cancer treatment options with their oncologist. While this change is temporary for some women, it can be permanent for others. Regardless, it’s a big change that can be hard to adjust to. That’s why we’ve compiled some important information that can help you understand more about what you could face as a cancer survivor in early menopause.

Cancer Treatments that Can Cause Menopause

Treatment-induced menopause can be brought on by various cancer treatment options, including:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiation therapy
- Hormone therapy
- Surgical removal of the ovaries



Out of these, chemotherapy is the primary cause of early-onset menopause (hence the name “chemopause”). This is because of the ovarian damage that can occur after taking certain chemo drugs.

Once the ovaries are damaged, the production of hormones like estrogen are reduced, resulting in troubles with menopause, fertility, and other reproductive factors. Without the circulation of hormones like estrogen to regulate the menstrual cycle, a woman’s body will eventually stop releasing eggs from her ovaries and her menstrual cycle will come to a standstill.

Unfortunately, there is no guaranteed way to predict the length of menopause. Depending on the patient, menopause can last anywhere from the length of treatment to the rest of her life. Although this can be difficult to hear, these unknowns about fertility must be talked about so you can prepare accordingly.

Several factors, such as your age before the start of treatment and which drugs you receive, can and do play into the likelihood of your menstrual cycle returning. Still, it is important to keep a cool head during the process and not bet on any particular outcome.

Symptoms of Cancer Treatment-Induced Menopause

Menopause, both treatment-induced and classic, share many of the same symptoms. However, due to the abrupt nature of treatment-induced menopause, symptoms of premature menopause can sometimes be more severe than if menopause had been reached naturally.

As you go through this change, you might experience:

- Hot flashes
 - Sensations of heat
 - Redness and/or flushing
 - Spontaneous, sometimes extreme sweating
- Changes in mood
 - Depression
 - Irritability
 - Mood swings
- Difficulty sleeping
- Concentration and memory issues
- Vaginal dryness
- Weight gain
- Urinary problems
 - Burning pain while urinating
 - Leaking when sneezing, coughing, etc.
- Lower libido and diminished sexual response

It’s understandable that you might feel incredibly overwhelmed. And, it’s not surprising that you may find it difficult to manage these symptoms when you’ve already experienced cancer survivorship and are dealing with other side effects of cancer treatment. Yes, emotional issues and depression are common factors in cases of typical menopause—but women who are struggling with the unique emotional battle of early-onset menopause caused by cancer treatment can experience even more pronounced effects.

When to Talk to Your Cancer Team

If you experience any health and treatment concerns, we encourage you to reach out to your Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers oncologist or cancer care team. Even before you begin treatment, it's a good idea to talk with your healthcare team about fertility options, concerns, and creating a plan to manage any symptoms you may experience should you be impacted by early menopause.

During and after treatment, maintaining an open line of communication with your cancer care team can make a big difference as to whether you'll be hopeful or fearful about the future. The more open and honest you are about your emotions and physical state, the more likely you can find relief through symptom management or reversal methods.



Managing Cancer Treatment-Induced Menopause

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

The effects of treatment-induced menopause can be eased with hormone replacement therapy that uses estrogens and progesterone. However, because HRT is very complex, it is a topic best discussed with your RMCC oncologist. Factors including the type of cancer being treated, your age, and the exact hormones to be used in HRT treatment can help determine whether or not this type of therapy is the right option for you.

Antidepressants

Some women may also benefit from a non-hormonal treatment option like antidepressants. One clinical trial even [indicated](#) that women who took antidepressants every day experienced fewer and less severe hot flashes. Antidepressants may also provide some women relief from the emotional highs and lows that can come with menopause.

Lifestyle Changes

Other, less-direct methods can also be used to manage menopause. These include:

- Limiting spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol in order to help reduce occurrences of hot flashes
- Incorporating regular, gentle exercise into your daily routine in order to relieve emotional symptoms
- Drinking lots of water in order to avoid bladder and vaginal infections from dryness and hormonal changes
- Using water-soluble lubricants to counteract vaginal dryness
- Wearing light, breathable clothing to help reduce physical discomfort from hot flashes

If you or a loved one has concerns about, or is experiencing premature menopause caused by cancer treatment, we encourage you to make an appointment to speak with your RMCC cancer care providers. The more we understand your thoughts, the better we can find ways to offer you relief and steer you towards health.



Dealing with Chemo Brain

As a cancer patient, it's important to know about the side effects you could experience during treatment. One such effect is "chemo brain."

Chemo brain is the common term used to describe the cognitive decline you may experience before, during, and/or after cancer treatment, even if you have not been treated with chemotherapy. You may also hear your doctor use other terms, such as cognitive dysfunction, cancer-related cognitive impairment, cancer therapy associated cognitive change, or post-chemotherapy cognitive impairment in reference to this particular side effect.

Often described as a mental "fog," chemo brain is marked by a lack of focus, the inability to concentrate, and trouble processing or remembering information. While some cancer patients only experience these symptoms for a short time, others may experience them for years.

Currently, researchers are working to find answers to the many questions regarding the memory changes that cancer patients who receive chemotherapy experience. While there is still much to learn, it's clear that chemo brain can be a frustrating and debilitating side effect of cancer and its treatments.

Signs and Symptoms of Chemo Brain

The following are examples of how patients have described the symptoms of chemo brain:

- Finding it hard to concentrate, focus, or pay attention
- Forgetfulness or memory lapses
- Being disorganized, when they usually aren't
- Feeling disoriented or extremely confused
 - Inability to do more than one thing at a time (multitask)
 - Difficulty recalling or remembering details such as names, dates, and common words

Keep in mind that the severity of these symptoms can range greatly. Some patients notice significant changes, while other cancer patients only experience subtle mental changes. And sometimes, others don't notice them at all. Many patients don't even bring it to the attention of their cancer care team until their everyday life starts to become affected.

Causes of Chemo Brain

Unfortunately, there is no clear cause of chemo brain. And, as mentioned earlier, it can even affect patients who have never had chemotherapy. Because of this, it has been suggested that the cause could be a combination of factors including:

- Cancer treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, or targeted therapy
- The cancer itself (particularly brain cancer)
- Age at the time of diagnosis
- Fatigue
- Poor nutrition
- Surgery and the anesthesia used during surgery
- Pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure
- Medications, such as antibiotics, antidepressants, pain medications, anti-nausea medications, or heart medications
- Infection
- Sleep issues
- Anemia (low red blood cell counts)
- Stress and other emotions such as anxiety and depression, that often occur with a cancer diagnosis and treatments



11 Ways to Manage Chemo Brain

The good news is that there are many ways you can help minimize the effects chemo brain can have on you. Here are some suggestions to help you cope:

1. Keep track of your schedule, creating reminders on a planner, computer, or smartphone.
2. Log important information such as phone numbers, addresses, meeting notes, and even movies or books you're interested in on a handy list (written or digitally).
3. Get an ample amount of rest and sleep.
4. Eat a nutrient-rich diet that includes a lot of brain-boosting vegetables, such as broccoli, beets, celery, and dark leafy greens.
5. Block off certain amounts of time to accomplish specific tasks. Time blocking is a simple, yet powerful technique that can structure your routine in a way that increases motivation, improves focus, boosts efficiency, and reduces stress.
6. Avoid distractions so you can focus completely. When possible, only take on one task at a time.
7. Exercise regularly, but only if you are able. Light to moderate activity is good for the body and the mind, even during cancer treatment, if approved by your oncologist.
8. Take note of your memory problems, jotting down when they happen as well as what's going on at the time they occur (medications that you've taken, time of day, situation, etc). Doing this can help your doctor narrow down what specifically may be affecting your memory. Ask for help when you need it. Tell your friends and loved ones when you experience symptoms of chemo brain, so they can give support and help with daily tasks that might drain your mental energy.

In cases where cognitive problems are long-term, your RMCC oncologist may prescribe other methods to help manage them. These may include:

9. Cognitive rehabilitation and cognitive training, which can help improve cognitive skills and coping abilities.
10. Medications, such as stimulants, antidepressants, cognition-enhancing drugs, and drugs like morphine, which block how narcotics work.
11. Occupational therapy and vocational rehabilitation to help patients handle job-related skills and the activities of daily living.

When to Talk With Your Oncologist

Remember, your RMCC oncologist and cancer care team are here for you. If you experience any symptoms of chemo brain, be sure to reach out to us. It will help us to know when the problems started and how they affect your daily life, so we encourage you to keep track of each time you notice problems.

- Some questions you might want to ask your RMCC care team could include:
- What is the cause of my chemo brain?
- What do you recommend I do to improve my memory? Or my ability to focus?

- Will these symptoms last a short or long time? Is there treatment for my symptoms?
- Is there a certain type of therapy I should participate in?
- Should I see another type of doctor who can help me with this? If so, can you recommend one?

Each appointment with your oncologist can result in an overload of information. In addition to talking with your cancer care team, consider sharing what you're feeling with friends and family. It can be such a relief being able to talk with someone you care about and trust.



Mental Health as a Cancer Survivor

While cancer affects patients physically, it can also impact a patient on a mental level, resulting in emotional distress, anxiety, and depression—both during treatment and after. During treatment, your primary concerns most likely revolved around your treatment plan, the side effects you could experience, and of course, how it was impacting the people you care about. But as a cancer survivor, it's likely those concerns have changed.

Now that you've beaten cancer you can take that big sigh of relief. But, that doesn't mean you'll be totally concern-free. In fact, feelings of anxiety and stress can sometimes be worse after treatment ends. With less focus on your physical health, there's more time to focus on your new normal—and oftentimes, this leads to another wave of emotions including worry, sadness, and fear. Are there steps you can take to regain a more positive and less anxious mental state?

Common Concerns and Feelings After Cancer Treatment

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we know that it's common for cancer survivors to struggle with several challenges at once. Challenges such as:

- Worrying that the cancer will come back, and if it does, where might it reappear?
- Not being as socially active as you once were. Gathering in groups can sometimes leave you vulnerable to conversations about your health that you aren't quite ready to have.
- Post-cancer body image. Your body could look different now due to surgery, weight gain, or weight loss.
- The inability to remember things. This lingering side effect, called "chemo brain," can be frightening to those who experience it.
- Feeling alone after treatment. During your cancer treatment, you may have been surrounded by helpers—doctors, nurses, friends, and family who drove you places, ran errands for you, cooked for you, and helped you maintain your home. Being independent again can leave you feeling overwhelmed and even depressed that the support system you had during treatment isn't there for you as often as before.
- Being concerned about your financial situation, whether it's related to medical bills or going back to work.

Surviving cancer is certainly a relief. But it could take a while for you to feel truly happy again—and that's OK. These negative feelings and emotions you may be feeling after cancer are common and completely normal.



Tips for Improving Your Mental Health After Cancer Treatment

You might find it challenging at first, but in time, your mental health can be improved once cancer treatment is over. We hope these tips will help get you started:

1. Accept that your feelings are normal and that it's OK to have them.
2. Reach out to those closest to you telling them about your feelings and concerns. There's no reason you should move forward on your own and your friends and family can be a real asset when it comes to trying to feel better.
3. Have a discussion with your general practitioner or cancer care team at your next appointment, letting them know how you've been feeling. If they think medicine might help, they can write a prescription.
4. Choose one or two things at a time that you can start to work on to relieve some of the stress. Make sure to focus on things you are in control of, such as your work situation or getting back to a healthy weight.
5. Consider talking to other survivors. Support groups are available as well as other support services for patients and survivors including meditation or yoga classes, art therapy, journaling, and more.

Visit RMCC's [Patient Resources](#) page to find a support program.

Making Sense of Cancer Recurrence and How to Manage the Fear of It

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we know that hearing the words “cancer free” is an incredibly pivotal moment for cancer survivors. While this is certainly a victory, it’s not a guarantee that you’ll be cancer free forever. Because of this, it’s understandable that you may feel anxious amidst the excitement.

A Cancer Survivor’s Big Question: What if It Comes Back?

According to a research paper published in the *Oncology Journal*, “fear of cancer recurrence is prevalent, distressing, and long-lasting, and can negatively impact patients’ quality of life, use of health services, and adherence to follow-up.” In other words, cancer survivors have a genuine fear of cancer recurrence. The study continues by saying that those who have no support system could lead to ongoing fear—even among cancer survivors who have low risk of the cancer returning.

Practical Tips for Managing Fear of Cancer Recurrence

Of course, turning off those anxious thoughts is often easier said than done. However, there’s good news: there are some practical strategies for managing fear of cancer recurrence—many of which resemble strategies for managing other common fears such as losing your job, being a victim of a random crime, or having an intruder break in while you’re sleeping.

As with these other situations, there are two main ways you can try to manage that fear. The first is to do all that you can to minimize the chances of your fear becoming reality. And the second is to train your brain not to obsess over uncertainties that are out of your control.

When it comes to cancer, an important part of taking control of your fear of recurrence is to remain diligent about regular post-cancer checkups and screenings. Additionally, it’s wise to heed your oncologist’s instructions regarding diet, exercise, medication, etc. According to an American Cancer Society report on cancer treatment and survivorship:

- Using tobacco after cancer treatment increases the risk of cancer recurrence
- Maintaining an exercise regimen after treatment reduces the risks of cancer recurrence and increases overall survival rates
- Being overweight or obese after treatment can reduce your chance of long-term survival

The more you strive to prevent recurrence, the easier it will become to relax a little bit.

Letting go of what’s out of your control, on the other hand, is usually much harder to do. If you do find this to be a struggle, consider talking with someone about it—a therapist, a cancer survivor support group member, a clergy person, or your oncologist. Sometimes, all it takes is a safe place to talk to help you cope with fear of cancer recurrence. The more you can get off your chest, the easier it can be to divert your focus in the direction of moving forward with your life.

Remember, even the best of intentions doesn’t guarantee that the cancer won’t recur. Still, it’s important to hold onto hope! Work towards directing your thoughts elsewhere, keeping in mind that living in fear of recurrence means you’re robbing yourself of precious cancer-free moments you can and should be enjoying!

Again, we urge you to avoid struggling with this worry on your own. Seek out someone who can help. For many survivors, it can be incredibly helpful to discuss their concerns and fears with others, especially other cancer survivors.

Coping with Body Changes After Cancer Treatment

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we know that making it through cancer treatment is a wonderful thing! However, some survivors will continue to experience lasting effects on the body that can affect their self-esteem. Because of this, we feel you should learn what steps you can take to make coping with these physical changes a little easier.

Cancer Can Have a Long-Term Impact on Your Body

Depending on the cancer treatment(s) you had, your body may have some very visible changes. And while some of these changes are permanent, others, although not permanent, may be noticeable for months or even years. With all of these differences to your appearance, it's understandable that your self-esteem and confidence may be impacted to the point of having to adjust and accept what's new for your post-treatment body.

Survivors must learn to cope with various physical changes, that can be either permanent or long-term. These might include:

- Hair that has changed in color and/or texture
- Scars that are a result of surgeries that removed a limb, breast, or other part of the body
- Ostomy (an opening created in the body so wastes can be collected in a bag)
- Reduction in muscle tone as a result of inactivity (called atrophy)

Some medications you take may also impact physical changes, such as:

- Skin tone changes
- Weight loss that can result from medications or loss of appetite
- Weight gain triggered by medications or restrictions limiting physical activity

To help avoid these potential long-lasting issues, focus on eating a healthy diet that includes good fats, lean proteins, and vegetables. Increasing your level of physical activity to build muscle could also help.

Coping with Body Changes

No one can truly understand a survivor's struggle with body image unless they've personally experienced cancer and the physical changes it causes. Those who have not walked in your shoes may find it easy to think that you should be grateful you survived your illness and that you shouldn't worry about how your body looks. The truth is, if your appearance was important to you before getting cancer, it's likely that it's still important to you after going through cancer.

There's no doubt about it: cancer is a life-changing experience—and one that often gives survivors a new perspective on what is and is not important in life. By shifting your focus towards the positive aspects about your body (not the least of which is that it is free from cancer), it's likely that you'll spend less time mourning physical changes you're unhappy with. Here is some advice that might help you during the times you are feeling self-conscious about aspects of your appearance:

- Remember that just because your body looks different on the outside, you are the same person on the inside. Those who loved you before cancer will continue to love you and your post-cancer body!
- Talk with other survivors. Above anyone else, they'll be more likely to understand what you're going through. In addition to validating your feelings, their experience and suggestions can help you find ways to cope.



- Go easy on yourself. It's only natural that you'd grieve your pre-cancer body! Doing so will help you eventually move past those normal feelings and adjust to your new body.
- Understand that people will be curious about the changes in your appearance. The people closest to you (and some not so close) may ask questions. Decide how you'll respond if people want to talk about these changes (if you don't feel like sharing this information, simply tell them you're not ready to talk about it at this time).
- When ready, consider researching possible reconstructive surgery, cosmetic solutions, and/or prosthetics that may be able to help you look more like your pre-cancer self. You can even discuss these options with your RMCC cancer care team.
- Keep in mind that time does not heal all wounds, but it can soften them. Some physical changes, such as hair loss, weight gain, or weight loss may go away eventually. Other changes like scars may become less noticeable over time.
- Focus on the positives. There are still things you can do to feel attractive! Depending on your unique physical situation, you can still get a manicure or pedicure; experiment with a beard, mustache, or goatee; buy some new clothes to accommodate changes to your body; have a makeover; try out new hairstyles, wigs, toupees, and/or hats; upgrade your eyeglasses; wear fun jewelry; etc., to draw attention to what you do love about your appearance.

Be sure to talk with your RMCC cancer care team, including our Social Workers and support groups, and/or seek help from a professional counselor if you continue to struggle with body issues. Our goal is to ensure you have the support you need to live a full life after cancer.

Caring for Your Mental Health After Cancer

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we understand that there are plenty of reasons to despise cancer—yet one that's not talked about often enough is how beating the disease physically can leave you feeling drained both socially and emotionally. Unfortunately, the cancer journey doesn't end when you become a survivor. In fact, it's something that will always be part of you, affecting both your mental and emotional health in some way. With that in mind, we encourage you to address, rather than ignore, these changes so that you can continue to move forward with life. Acknowledging them and taking steps to sort through them can help you cope better while becoming a stronger and more compassionate person.

The Residual Social and Emotional Fallout of Cancer

In big ways or small, it's safe to say that every cancer survivor has experienced a whirlwind of emotions, including shock, disbelief, fear, and anger. While some people experience a simultaneous improvement in their physical and emotional health, others need more time. For them, beating the disease physically is just one step in a long journey toward recovery because oftentimes, emotional wounds take much longer to heal than physical ones.

Emotional Symptoms for Survivors is Normal

Although anyone can be affected by emotions such as anxiety, fear, depression, and social withdrawal, cancer survivors are even more vulnerable. According to a recent article, nine in 100 people experience depression, but among cancer survivors, that rate is tripled to 27 in 100 experiencing depression.



Participating in cancer survivors' support groups and/or talking to a psychotherapist can help you get your feelings out in the open which, in itself, can be incredibly helpful!

Commonly, cancer survivors:

- Mourn the loss of their pre-cancer life, attitude, and outlook
- Feel guilt about beating the disease when others did not
- [Worry](#) about cancer recurrence
- Struggle with body image issues and, consequently, become withdrawn socially and intimately

Signs That It May Be Time to Seek Help

It can be hard to know when to get help, but there are some symptoms that indicate it's time:

- Disinterest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad, hopeless, afraid, and/or nervous much of the time
- Avoiding friends, family members, and other people or places out of fear
- Feeling guilty or like you're a burden to others
- Crying for no reason at all
- Difficulty sleeping
- The need for constant reassurance from others

At RMCC, we want you to know that you aren't alone in this. Just as we were there for you during cancer treatment, we are here to help you work through any emotional ups and downs you may face as a survivor.

We encourage you to talk with your cancer care team about the [resources available to you](#).

In addition to talking with a professional or other survivors, a primary care physician can be an incredibly helpful tool when it comes to struggling with emotional problems. Recent articles suggest that 8% of survivors with depression reported they did not have a primary care physician, compared to just 4% of survivors who were not dealing with depression.

If you have a primary care physician, he or she is trained to identify the symptoms of depression and is therefore able to provide you with the proper help. They can also determine if you could benefit from anti-anxiety or antidepressant medications.

Remember, your joy and quality of life is precious, and experiencing social or emotional changes is completely normal. After all, you've just been through a monumental physical battle—one in which you fought and won! You need plenty of help to overcome your physical cancer struggles, so don't hesitate to enlist help overcoming your emotional cancer struggles too!



Support After Cancer Overview

Congratulations, you're officially a cancer survivor! No more frequent visits to the cancer center for treatment or check-ins with your cancer care team. While this is an exciting time, it can also be a little unnerving now that you're "on your own." You might even be wondering, "What comes next?"

It's understandable that you may be feeling a wide range of emotions including excitement, gratitude, anxiety, and even fear. Considering that every survivor and their circumstances are different, that's completely normal! Transitioning back to a "normal" life doesn't happen overnight and sometimes requires a little help. Because of this, your RMCC cancer care team will be by your side helping you with the next steps. Still, it's a good idea to learn how you can be proactive after treatment.

Get a Follow-Up Care Plan

Once your cancer treatment comes to an end, you won't see your cancer team as much. However, it's necessary to come back for follow-up care. Together, you and your cancer team will work to create a plan for follow-up appointments that will help you reach important post-treatment milestones. With their guidance, you can also get familiar with what to expect, including how to alleviate the fear of recurrence, which is a common source of anxiety for survivors.

Get Organized

With less need for your cancer care team, you'll once again rely more often on doctors outside of oncology for your routine medical needs. Moving forward, it's important to inform all of your doctors about the type of cancer you had and how your cancer was treated. Knowing this information will help them remain watchful for side effects that can show up months or years after treatment ends. Be sure to provide your doctors with detailed copies of your personal health records.

Get Emotional Support

You probably had a lot of support as a patient. The good news is that you can still have support as a survivor. No one understands how you're feeling like other survivors who have walked a similar path. Visiting our [Survivorship](#) page or talking with your cancer care team is a great first step toward finding support groups that will allow you to freely discuss the struggles, worries, and emotions you may be feeling now that treatment has ended.

Remember, any major life change can be a bit scary and it's normal that you may fear this transition from cancer patient to cancer survivor. Keep in mind that we at Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers are here for you, striving to help you get all you need to transition into your new cancer survivor role.

Follow-Up Care for Cancer Survivors

As a cancer survivor, you know that cancer is much more than treatment. It's a journey that involves caring for yourself in a whole new way now and in the future.

Just think back to the beginning of your cancer survivor journey. At that time, it was all about determining what your new normal would look like and sharing your current health status with loved ones. During the middle of the journey, you had to focus on cancer treatment and the physical and emotional side effects of it.

Now that treatment is behind you, you can look ahead, setting your sights on the rest of your life. You might even feel up to adding more enjoyable activities into your schedule now that less time is devoted to doctor appointments. It's that feeling of being ready to "move on."

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we know that moving on is a good thing! With that said, we encourage you to remember that it's incredibly important to tend to your health, which includes your follow-up care as a cancer patient and remembering to tend to regular health screenings.



No one understands how you feel like other survivors who have walked a similar path.

Step 1: Have a Cancer Survivorship Plan

Fortunately, your RMCC cancer care team will provide you with a follow-up cancer plan that includes information regarding your treatment history, your care team, suggestions for diet and exercise, and what late and long-term side effects you could expect as a result of your cancer treatment. According to the National Cancer Institute, this plan should be fairly detailed and answer questions such as:

- What records should I keep about my treatment?
- When will I begin to feel more like myself?
- Are there certain things I can do to maintain good health?
- Are there specific doctors I should see for my follow-up care?
- How often should I see my doctor(s) for follow-up care?
- Are there certain symptoms I should watch for or be concerned about?
- What long-term health issues could I expect after my cancer treatment?

If your cancer follow-up plan doesn't address these or other questions that you may have, we encourage you to bring it to the attention of your RMCC cancer care team.



The sooner cancer recurrence is caught, the more likely it can be treated more effectively.

Step 2: Be Diligent Regarding Cancer Follow-up Appointments

Your cancer experience is unique, which means your follow-up instructions will be tailored to your specific needs. For instance, factors such as the type of cancer you had, how it was treated, and your overall health will influence how often you have follow-up appointments. On average, though, most cancer survivors are instructed to see their oncologist for follow-up appointments every three to four months for the first two to three years after treatment, and then once or twice a year. Since cancer recurrence is always a possibility, it is extremely important to make and keep your follow-up appointments.



About Cancer Recurrence

Unfortunately, there's no guarantee your cancer won't return. There isn't even a foolproof way to prevent it from happening. With that said, there are certain steps you can take to be as healthy as possible, such as these that are recommended by the American Cancer Society:

- Try to incorporate at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits each day into your diet
- Eat less red meats (beef, pork, lamb) and processed meats (sausage, lunch meats, etc.)
- Limit alcohol consumption to one (women) or two (men) drinks per day
- Lose weight if you are overweight or obese
- Exercise regularly, aiming for a minimum of 150 minutes per week
- Do strength training exercises at least twice per week
- Focus on eating foods made with whole grains rather than refined grains and sugars
- Return to normal daily activities as soon after cancer treatment as possible

Also, take note if you notice signs of cancer recurrence, such as:

- Original cancer symptoms return
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, or difficulty swallowing
- New or unusual pain that lingers
- Chills or fever
- Trouble breathing
- Weight loss that can't be explained
- Blood in your urine or stool
- Persistent cough
- Frequent headaches
- Easy bleeding or bruising
- New skin lesions or changes such as an abnormal rash, etc.
- Unexplained lumps, bumps, or swelling
- Any unusual symptoms that concern you

Step 3: Get Support from Other Cancer Survivors

As a cancer survivor, it's likely that you'll feel more anxious about your health than those who have never gone through a similar experience. Keep in mind that these feelings are completely normal. The good news is that there are a couple of ways you can help put some of the worries at ease. One is to remain diligent in attending your follow-up oncology appointments. Another is to look for support from others who understand what you're going through. A support group for survivors is a great way to get that connection.

Surrounding yourself with other cancer survivors gives you the opportunity to open up about your fears and anxieties to others who are familiar with your struggles. Realizing you are not alone and gaining strength from fellow survivors will help you transition to life after cancer.

Be sure to talk with a member of your Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers care team about the [support groups](#) like "I'm Done with Treatment, What's Next?" as well as events in the area. [Click here to view the events calendar.](#)

Keeping Your Personal Health Records

As a cancer patient, visiting your doctor became a big part of your routine. Now, as a cancer survivor, it's likely you've noticed that you still need to visit your doctor somewhat regularly—at least more than people who have never experienced a serious illness. You've probably also noticed all the paperwork that comes along with those visits—some of which you might be wondering about. At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we want to make sure you fully understand the documents that comprise your personal health records, including what you need to keep, why, and for how long.

Your cancer treatment summary is highly important!



Cancer Treatment Survivor Summary: A Cancer Survivor's Most Important Health Record

It's important that you keep a summary of your health records throughout treatment. This document should list your exact cancer diagnosis and when you received it, what stage your cancer was, and any other relevant information that came from your pathology report. It should also describe all of the cancer treatment(s) you received.

Essentially, this document should reflect any pertinent information that could affect your health in the future.

Keep in mind that most doctors you see in the future won't know your medical history. Because of this, we recommend that you share a copy of your treatment summary with them. Additionally, tracking down individual health records after time has passed can be incredibly challenging. Sometimes, it's impossible. However, keeping a treatment summary ensures that you have easy access to your pertinent medical records when you need them.

The medical terms on the sheet can be hard to understand for many people, and that's okay. What matters most is that it will provide great insight for any future physicians who may need to provide care for cancer or another condition.

Other Important Medical Records to Keep

Some other important medical records to hold onto include:

- Current and past medications (including information about allergies or adverse reactions to medications)
- Immunization records
- Records of past appointments, including the date and the doctor's name
- Treatment plans for existing health conditions
- Hospital bills
- Results from imaging tests
- Records detailing other past major illnesses

It's important to understand that your physician may only be required to keep your records for a limited period of time.

And even if your physician still does have your records, they may ask you to pay a retrieval fee.

Keeping Track of Your Health Records

These days, electronic medical records (EMRs) for patients are commonplace among healthcare providers. With that said, there is no guarantee that this method of record keeping is always reliable. Providers are not perfect and they are often incredibly busy. Because of this, it's a good idea to personally keep track of your records rather than solely relying on your providers to do so.

The good news is that managing your records is easier than you realize—especially if you're comfortable with tracking them digitally. Today, you can find various apps to help organize your medical records using your smartphone, personal computer, or tablet. This [article](#) mentions 10 apps you can look into for starters. The technology is right there at your fingertips so make sure you take advantage of it!

Of course, keeping paper copies as a backup is always smart. Don't hesitate to reach out to a member of your RMCC cancer care team so they can help you get copies of all your important health records (especially records related to your cancer treatment). Then, be sure to store them safely and conveniently at home so you can have them ready each time you meet with a new medical provider.



Helping Others as a Cancer Survivor

You probably remember exactly how you felt after getting your cancer diagnosis. Most likely, you felt a range of emotions including shock, disbelief, and fear. And, even if you had friends and family on standby ready to help, you still might have felt alone. While they certainly had good intentions, understanding what you were feeling was probably a challenge unless they too had experienced cancer. What makes you different is that you're a survivor—one who is uniquely qualified to help cancer patients.

Volunteering: A Gift to Others and to Yourself

You understand on a personal level just how hard it is to get through cancer treatment. Even the most independent people need help! Remember the times you received support during your own cancer journey? That was a selfless gift. Now that your cancer battle is over, you have the opportunity to pay that kindness forward by helping others!

The recipient will benefit from your help. But you'll benefit from it, too! When you were being treated for cancer, you may have stopped working and/or had to rely on others to lighten the load for you during the times when you couldn't keep up. As a result, you may have begun to doubt your self-worth and question your abilities. By helping others, you will regain your confidence and understand that you have much to offer!

Cancer Survivors Can Help Cancer Patients In Many Ways

When it comes to helping other survivors, there's something for every type of personality. Regardless of whether you're a "people person" or prefer to help out behind the scenes, there are plenty of opportunities you're sure to find suitable. Some positions you might consider could include:

- Attending a cancer support group that helps patients
- Volunteering your time and talents at one of the many nonprofit organizations that exist to raise money for cancer research or patient care
- Working directly with patients and their families to provide aid
- Participating in some of the online resources, such as Facebook groups or support programs, which are helpful for those who aren't able to get out

As a cancer survivor, what you have to offer is valuable. By giving some of your time, you will be making a big impact on the lives of others. Visit the [American Cancer Society website](#) to learn more about how you can get involved.

At Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers, we believe you are living proof that an active life can exist after cancer.



Making A Difference to Another Cancer Patient

As a cancer survivor, you can help cancer patients immensely. After all, you have literally "walked a mile in their shoes." You've reached the end of a difficult journey that others are just starting, you've experienced ups and downs, and it's likely that you've gleaned some wisdom along the way.

You might be wondering what you can do now that cancer treatment has ended. During your cancer treatment, it's possible that you experienced help from a cancer survivor—help that you would like to pay forward to someone else. This is the perfect time to make that happen! By investing a little bit of time volunteering, you can make a difference in the lives of patients undergoing cancer treatment.

As a cancer survivor
what you have to
offer is valuable.



How Cancer Survivors Can Help Patients

The good news is that there are a number of ways you can brighten the lives of people being treated for cancer. Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, there are many volunteer opportunities that will suit your personality. If you'd like to work directly with cancer patients, consider volunteering for one of the many programs or support groups that allow you to do so. Or, if you prefer a more indirect position, those opportunities are available, too. Whichever method of volunteering makes you the most comfortable, the first step is to decide how much time you're able to devote and then start looking for a volunteer position to fill.

If working one-on-one with cancer patients suits you best, depending on where you live, you may find programs that give you the opportunity to:

- Drive patients to and from their doctor appointments.
- Help cancer patients at home by doing their grocery shopping, getting them meals, or taking care of their pets.
- Brighten a patient's day by visiting them at the hospital while they're recuperating from surgery.
- Lead, co-lead, or be an active participant in a cancer support group.
- Go with a patient to their doctor appointments and take notes for them.
- Share your cancer experience with patients being treated for the cancer you had. Every patient's experience is different, but hearing about your personal treatment journey will provide valuable

insight in regards to what they can expect. We love for RMCC patients to share their story with us; you can submit yours on our website [here](#).

- Volunteer your expertise to benefit cancer patients. Are you a cosmetologist? Masseuse? Home improvement contractor? Financial planner? Certain skills you have could help patients feel better physically or address things they aren't able to due to cancer.

If you prefer to have a more behind-the-scenes role, consider:

- Teaming up with a local organization (or starting your own group) to create and distribute care packages to patients undergoing cancer treatment.
- Volunteering at a cancer-information hotline.
- Volunteering to help with administrative tasks at a local cancer charity.
- Donating money to a cancer charity or launching your own fundraising drive.

Finding an Opportunity to Volunteer

There are several ways to get started if you are interested in helping cancer patients. One way is to reach out and offer assistance to anyone you know who is being treated for cancer. Sometimes, people can be reluctant to accept help even when they desperately want to. Because of this, it's important to be specific and proactive. Instead of saying, "Please call me if I can help in any way!" say, "If it's OK with you, I will stop by around noon on Wednesday to pick up your shopping list (or walk your dog, mow your lawn, etc.)."

If you'd like to be matched with a patient in need of support, the following programs can help you:

- [Ray of Hope Cancer Foundation](#) is an organization committed to providing cancer financial assistance to Coloradans with dignity and compassion.
- [Project Angel Heart](#) addresses a major challenge for Coloradans who are ill: getting the nutrition they need to get stronger, heal, and remain at home. They prepare and deliver medically tailored meals to people living with life-threatening illnesses.
- [Cancer Support Community](#) is the largest professionally-led nonprofit network of cancer support worldwide. They are dedicated to ensuring that all people impacted by cancer are empowered by knowledge, strengthened by action, and sustained by community.
- [Colorado Ovarian Cancer Alliance](#) is a Denver-based organization whose mission is to promote awareness and early detection of ovarian cancer through advocacy and education while providing support to people in Colorado affected by ovarian cancer.
- [The Bust of Steamboat](#) works hard to provide women with breast cancer both financial and emotional support during a very stressful time. Consider donating to their cause.
- [The Englewood Area Cancer Foundation \(EACF\)](#) is a community-based and locally-supported nonprofit organization committed to raising funds and securing donations for the benefit of local cancer warriors and their families.
- [Cancer League of Colorado](#) is committed to finding a cure for cancer by raising funds to support innovative cancer research and cancer-related services in the state of Colorado. Learn more about [what they do](#) and [how you can volunteer](#).
- [Susan G. Komen](#) has several volunteer opportunities throughout Colorado communities that can help patients with breast cancer. [See how you can get involved](#).
- [Imerman Angels](#) will screen you, match you with a cancer patient in need of support, and provide training.
- [American Cancer Society: Reach to Recovery](#), [Colorectal Cancer Alliance Buddy Program](#), and [Lung Cancer Alliance Phone Buddy Program](#) match survivors of breast, colorectal cancer, and lung cancer, respectively, with patients being treated for these diseases.

Other cancer survivorship resources for Rocky Mountain Cancer Centers patients and/or survivors can be found [here](#).

Keep in mind that volunteering doesn't just benefit the patient, it can benefit you as well. Not only does the time you invest help ease cancer patients' physical and emotional burdens, it will probably lift your spirits to know you've had a positive impact on someone during a difficult time in their life. Remember, you're a survivor —and your success story makes you incredibly qualified to help cancer patients during their time of need.