

# Cancer Survivorship: Coping with Long-Term Treatment Effects

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## Opinion Article

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### DESCRIPTION

Surviving cancer is a breath-taking achievement, marking the end of a challenging journey filled with treatments, uncertainties, and emotional upheavals. However, for many cancer survivors, the completion of treatment does not signify the end of their health concerns. Instead, they often face a new set of challenges stemming from the long-term effects of cancer treatment. These effects, which can persist for years after treatment ends, highlight the need for comprehensive survivorship care that addresses both the physical and emotional well-being of individuals beyond their cancer diagnosis.

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, and targeted therapies are designed to eradicate cancer cells or prevent their growth. While these treatments are essential for achieving remission and improving survival rates, they can also have lasting impacts on the body.

#### Common long-term effects

**Physical health concerns:** Cancer survivors may experience physical effects such as fatigue, pain, neuropathy (nerve damage), lymphedema (swelling), infertility, hormonal changes, and cardiovascular issues. These effects can arise from direct damage to healthy tissues during treatment or as late complications that develop months or even years later.

**Cognitive changes:** Some cancer survivors report cognitive changes commonly referred to as "chemo brain" or "cognitive dysfunction." These changes may include difficulties with memory, concentration, multitasking, and processing speed, impacting daily functioning and quality of life.

**Emotional and psychological challenges:** The emotional toll of cancer treatment can extend into survivorship, with many individuals experiencing anxiety, depression, fear of recurrence, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or adjustment disorders.

Despite growing awareness of long-term effects, survivorship care remains a relatively understudied and underfunded area of oncology. Many cancer survivors report feeling unprepared for the physical and emotional challenges they encounter after treatment ends.

### **Integrated survivorship care plans and resources to support survivors**

**Fragmented care:** Transitioning from active treatment to survivorship can be daunting for patients, as they may no longer receive frequent medical monitoring and support. The lack of coordinated survivorship care plans can lead to gaps in healthcare delivery, delayed detection of late effects, and suboptimal management of ongoing health concerns.

**Survivorship needs:** Cancer survivors have diverse needs that require personalized survivorship care plans tailored to their specific diagnosis, treatment history, and ongoing health issues. These plans should encompass regular follow-up care, screenings for recurrence or late effects, management of treatment-related symptoms, and support for psychosocial well-being.

**Education and empowerment:** Empowering survivors with information about potential long-term effects, self-care strategies, and resources for managing physical and emotional health is essential. Education can help survivors advocate for their health needs and actively participate in their survivorship care.

### **Strategies to be implemented**

**Survivorship care plans:** Healthcare providers should develop and implement survivorship care plans that outline recommended follow-up care, screenings, and interventions based on individual survivorship needs. These plans promote continuity of care and empower survivors to monitor their health proactively.

**Multidisciplinary approach:** Survivorship care should involve a multidisciplinary team of healthcare providers, including oncologists, primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, social workers, and rehabilitation specialists. This collaborative approach ensures comprehensive assessment and management of physical, emotional, and psychosocial aspects of survivorship.

**Research and innovation:** Continued research is essential to better understand the mechanisms of long-term effects, identify risk factors, and develop strategies to mitigate adverse outcomes. Innovations in survivorship care, such as survivorship clinics, telemedicine, and digital health interventions, can enhance accessibility and effectiveness of care delivery.

Survivorship is not just about surviving cancer; it is about thriving in life after cancer. By addressing the long-term effects of treatment and promoting comprehensive survivorship care, healthcare providers can empower cancer survivors to live full, healthy lives. This includes supporting survivors in managing physical health concerns, navigating emotional challenges, and embracing a renewed sense of purpose and strength.

The long-term effects of cancer treatment highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of survivorship. As the number of cancer survivors continues to grow globally, it is imperative to prioritize survivorship care that extends beyond initial treatment. By investing in research, improving healthcare delivery, and empowering survivors with knowledge and support, we can enhance survivorship outcomes and foster a future where cancer survivors thrive with dignity and resilience. Comprehensive survivorship care is not just an option, it is an essential component of the cancer journey that honors the strength and perseverance of every survivor.