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After Nasopharyngeal Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

For many people, cancer treatment often raises questions about next steps as a survivor.

- [Living as a Nasopharyngeal Cancer Survivor](#)

Cancer Concerns After Treatment

Treatment may remove or destroy the cancer, but it's very common to have questions and concerns about cancer coming back or treatment no longer working.

- [Second Cancers After Nasopharyngeal Cancer](#)

Living as a Nasopharyngeal Cancer Survivor

For most people with nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC), treatment can remove or destroy the cancer. The end of treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You may be relieved to finish treatment, yet it's hard not to worry about cancer coming back. This is very common if you've had cancer.

For other people, the cancer might never go away completely. Some people may get

regular treatment with chemotherapy or other treatments to try and help keep the cancer in check. Learning to live with cancer that does not go away can be difficult and very stressful.

Life after cancer means returning to some familiar things and also making some new choices.

Follow-up care

After you have completed treatment, your doctors will still want to watch you closely. It's very important to go to all of your follow-up appointments. During these visits, your doctors will ask questions about any problems you may have and may do exams and lab tests or imaging tests (such as MRI or CT scans) to look for signs of cancer or treatment side effects. Your health care team will discuss which tests should be done and how often based on the [stage](#)¹ of your cancer and the type of treatment you had.

Most doctors recommend follow-up exams at least every few months for the first 2 years after treatment, then less often as time goes on. If you had radiation therapy to the neck, your doctor will check your thyroid function with blood tests once or twice a year.

You may be advised to see your dentist after treatment to check on the health of your teeth. Your doctor will also want to keep a close eye on your hearing, speech, and swallowing, which can be affected by treatment. If you're having problems with any of these, your doctor may refer you to a therapist.

Imaging tests such as CT or PET/CT scans may be done within 6 months after treatment to get an idea of what the nasopharynx and neck area now look like. Further imaging tests may be done if you later develop any signs or symptoms that might be caused by a return of the cancer.

Almost any cancer treatment can have side effects. Some may last for a few weeks to months, but others can last the rest of your life. This is the time for you to talk to your cancer care team about any changes or problems you notice and any questions or concerns you have.

It's very important to report any new symptoms to the doctor right away, because they may prompt your doctor to do tests that could help find recurrent cancer as early as possible. This is when the chance of successful treatment is greatest.

Ask your doctor for a survivorship care plan

Talk with your doctor about developing a survivorship care plan for you. This plan might include:

- A suggested schedule for follow-up exams and tests
- A schedule for other tests you might need in the future, such as early detection (screening) tests for other types of cancer, or tests to look for long-term health effects from your cancer or its treatment
- A list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your doctor
- Diet and physical activity suggestions
- Reminders about your appointments with your primary care provider (PCP), who will monitor your general health care

Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records

Even after treatment, it's very important to keep health insurance. Tests and doctor visits cost a lot, and even though no one wants to think about cancer coming back, this could happen.

At some point after your cancer treatment, you might find yourself seeing a new doctor who doesn't know about your medical history. It's important to keep copies of your medical records to give your new doctor the details of your diagnosis and treatment. Learn more in [Keeping Copies of Important Medical Records²](#).

Can I lower my risk of NPC progressing or coming back?

If you have (or have had) NPC, you probably want to know if there are things you can do that might lower your risk of the cancer growing or coming back, such as exercising, eating a certain type of diet, or taking nutritional supplements. Unfortunately, it's not yet clear if there are things you can do that will help.

Adopting healthy behaviors such as [not smoking³](#), [eating well⁴](#), [getting regular physical activity⁵](#), and [staying at a healthy weight⁶](#) might help, but no one knows for sure. Still, we do know that these types of changes can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of NPC or other cancers.

About dietary supplements

So far, no [dietary supplements](#)⁷ (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of NPC progressing or coming back. This doesn't mean that no supplements will help, but it's important to know that none have been proven to do so.

Dietary supplements are not regulated like medicines in the United States – they do not have to be proven effective (or even safe) before being sold, although there are limits on what they're allowed to claim they can do. If you're thinking about taking any type of nutritional supplement, talk to your health care team first. They can help you decide which ones you can use safely while avoiding those that might be harmful.

If the cancer comes back

If the cancer does recur at some point, your treatment options will depend on where the cancer is located, what treatments you've had before, and your overall health. For more information on how recurrent cancer is treated, see [Treatment Options, by Stage of Nasopharyngeal Cancer](#)⁸.

For more general information on dealing with a recurrence, you may also want to see [When Your Cancer Comes Back: Cancer Recurrence](#).⁹

Could I get a second cancer after treatment?

People who've had NPC can still get other cancers. In fact, NPC survivors are at higher risk for getting some other types of cancer. Learn more in [Second Cancers After nasopharyngeal Cancer](#).

Getting emotional support

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when cancer is a part of your life. Some people are affected more than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support from other people, whether friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others. Learn more in [Life After Cancer](#)¹⁰.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/nasopharyngeal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/be-healthy-

- [after-treatment/keeping-copies-of-important-medical-records.html](#)
3. www.cancer.org/healthy/stay-away-from-tobacco.html
 4. www.cancer.org/healthy/eat-healthy-get-active/eat-healthy.html
 5. www.cancer.org/healthy/eat-healthy-get-active/get-active.html
 6. www.cancer.org/healthy/eat-healthy-get-active/take-control-your-weight.html
 7. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/complementary-and-alternative-medicine/dietary-supplements.html
 8. www.cancer.org/cancer/nasopharyngeal-cancer/treating/by-stage.html
 9. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/understanding-recurrence/coping-with-cancer-recurrence.html
 10. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/be-healthy-after-treatment/life-after-cancer.html

References

National Comprehensive Cancer Network, Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology (NCCN Guidelines®), Head and Neck Cancers, Version 1.2018 -- February 15, 2018. Accessed at www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/pdf/head-and-neck.pdf on April 24, 2018.

See all references for Nasopharyngeal Cancer
(www.cancer.org/cancer/nasopharyngeal-cancer/references.html)

Last Revised: September 24, 2018

Second Cancers After Nasopharyngeal Cancer

Cancer survivors can be affected by a number of health problems, but often their greatest concern is facing cancer again. If a cancer comes back after treatment it is called a *recurrence*. But some cancer survivors may develop a new, unrelated cancer later. This is called a *second cancer*. No matter what type of cancer you have had, it's still possible to get another (new) cancer, even after surviving the first.

Unfortunately, being treated for cancer doesn't mean you can't get another cancer. People who've had cancer can still get the same types of cancers that other people get. In fact, certain types of cancer and cancer treatments can be linked to a higher risk of certain second cancers.

Survivors of nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC) can get any second cancer, but they have an increased risk of:

- [Cancer of the tongue](#)¹
- [Cancer of the nose and nasal cavity](#)²
- [Cancer of the esophagus](#)³
- [Cancer of the bone and joints](#)⁴ (mostly the jaw bone or mandible)

Follow-up after treatment

After completing treatment for NPC, you should still see your doctor regularly. Your doctor may order tests to look for signs that the cancer has come back or spread. These tests are also useful in finding some second cancers, particularly a new lung cancer or cancer of the mouth or throat. Experts don't recommend any other tests to look for second cancers in patients who don't have symptoms. Let your doctor know about any new symptoms or problems, because they could be caused by the cancer coming back, a new disease, or a second cancer.

Survivors of NPC should follow the [American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of cancer](#)⁵ and [stay away from tobacco products](#)⁶. Smoking increases the risk of getting certain second cancers as well as other health problems.

To help maintain good health, survivors should also:

- Get to and stay at a [healthy weight](#)⁷
- Keep [physically active](#)⁸ and limit the time you spend sitting or lying down
- Follow a [healthy eating pattern](#)⁹ that includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limits or avoids red and processed meats, sugary drinks, and highly processed foods
- Not drink [alcohol](#)¹⁰. If you do drink, have no more than 1 drink per day for women or 2 per day for men

These steps may also lower the risk of some other health problems.

See [Second Cancers in Adults](#)¹¹ for more information about causes of second cancers.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/nasal-cavity-and-paranasal-sinus-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/esophagus-cancer.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/bone-cancer.html
5. www.cancer.org/healthy/find-cancer-early/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html
6. www.cancer.org/healthy/stay-away-from-tobacco.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/diet-physical-activity/body-weight-and-cancer-risk.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/diet-physical-activity.html
9. www.cancer.org/healthy/eat-healthy-get-active/acs-guidelines-nutrition-physical-activity-cancer-prevention/guidelines.html
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/diet-physical-activity/alcohol-use-and-cancer.html
11. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/second-cancers-in-adults.html

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Rock CL, Thomson C, Gansler T, et al. American Cancer Society guideline for diet and physical activity for cancer prevention. *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*. 2020;70(4). doi:10.3322/caac.21591. Accessed at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.3322/caac.21591> on June 9, 2020.

Sun C, Hu Z, Zhong Z, et al. Clinical and prognostic analysis of second primary squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue after radiotherapy for nasopharyngeal carcinoma. *Br J Oral Maxillofac Surg*. 2014;52(8):715-720.

See all references for Nasopharyngeal Cancer
(www.cancer.org/cancer/nasopharyngeal-cancer/references.html)

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