

FEATURE STORY

# After Treatment: A Post-Treatment Prescription

*Patients are no longer on their own when treatment ends*

Over the past two decades, as survival rates for cancer patients have greatly increased, cancer survivorship has grown into its own definition as the last and longest part of the cancer journey—with its own cadre of researchers and an official standing at the National Cancer Institute with the opening of the Office of Cancer Survivorship in 1996. Indeed, now that the number of survivors is estimated at 12 million in the United States, experts suggest that treatment of cancer survivors may soon become its own medical specialty, like podiatry or geriatrics.

Each year, more than 1.4 million Americans are diagnosed with cancer. Within months of diagnosis, hundreds of thousands of them will return to their “normal” lives after treatment, feeling anything but normal and finding themselves medically underserved, according to the 2005 landmark report “From Cancer Patient to Cancer Survivor: Lost in Transition” by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. The report marked the official recognition of survivorship as a distinct phase of cancer care and detailed the unique physical and emotional issues for those who have been diagnosed with cancer.

In addition to recommending that medical practice guidelines be created for cancer survivors, the report recommended that every patient end treatment with a full summary of the care received, and a survivorship plan that would list important information about diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up. The summary should include treatment regimens with resulting side effects; recommendations for looking for recurrent and new cancer(s); and personal recommendations for nutrition, exercise, quitting smoking, and/or rehabilitation. These recommendations would be updated over time.

Survivors currently find themselves unsure of which doctor to see after treatment ends, and with today’s complicated health care system, fractured care delivery, ever-changing insurance coverage, and plethora of specialists, it’s hard to keep up with medical history and long-term follow-up appointments, not to mention

the standard screening and physical needs that accompany aging.

More oncologists are now putting a plan in place where your oncology team is responsible for connecting with your primary care physician during and after treatment. Often, primary care providers are not fully versed in the follow-up requirements for cancer survivors, as these continually evolve over time, so it's important to educate your primary care physician or find one who is willing to collaborate with your oncologist to provide quality follow-up care.

No matter who directs the pieces of the plan or how it plays out over time, you need to be empowered to ask for summaries of your treatment and a survivorship plan that will help guide care for the rest of your life.