Care after breast cancer treatment

Open follow-up advice at The Hillingdon Hospital
This leaflet has been written for patients who have finished their breast cancer treatment. It has been prepared to give you greater understanding of the signs and symptoms of recurrent cancer. Most women’s greatest fear is the thought of breast cancer returning and worry about all sorts of aches and pains.

At Hillingdon hospital we offer “open follow up” care. Once all treatment has been finished you will see the Doctor in clinic and be offered the choice between “open follow up” or having regular appointments. From previous work, we recognise that most women feel very anxious when attending clinic appointments, and many have an appointment when they do not have any problems to report. Other women will develop problems in between appointments. Previous patients have therefore found it more beneficial to have an open appointment.

An open appointment means that you can telephone your breast nurse anytime you have any concerns and if appropriate, an appointment with our team will be arranged within 2 weeks. Contact details are given at the end of this leaflet.

This leaflet will help you to know ‘what to look for’, and who to contact if you think that you may have a problem.
If you have concerns about your hormone treatment or wish to see us again at the end of the 5 years of treatment please phone for an appointment. Your name is usually put on a waiting list and you will be automatically be recalled at 5 years to discuss your hormone treatment.

**Your feelings and emotions.**

For many people a diagnosis of breast cancer is a life-altering event. What was normal may have changed. But with time you will find a “new normal”.

Finishing treatment can bring fear and uncertainty. When treatment ends, it is natural to have feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

If you continue to feel low, or are finding it difficult to cope please contact your Breast Nurse who will advise you or refer you for counselling.

The experience of cancer may also make you think about what is important in your life and you may make positive changes as a result.

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**What to look for?**

Breast cancer cells can sometimes reappear in the tissue of the breast or chest wall. If breast cancer cells are going to cause a problem somewhere else in the body, the most likely places are the bones, the lungs, the liver or occasionally the brain. All of the symptoms described below can be caused by other conditions but if you are worried please contact us via your Breast Care Nurse using the contact details at the end of this leaflet.

**Gradually worsening symptoms**

These are symptoms that may be suggestive of breast cancer recurrence and develop over days to weeks.

If they occur, please contact your Breast Care Nurse, Monday to Friday. 9am -5pm.

**Local Recurrence**

A new lump or swelling in your breast, neck, above your collar bone or under your arm. Skin changes or raised spots on the breast or chest wall.

**Bone Pain.**

Pain in your back, hips or ribs that lasts constantly for 2 weeks, does not respond to pain killers and keeps you awake at night then this may be a pain that needs to be investigated.

**Abdominal Symptoms**

Loss of appetite, weight loss, feeling sick and bloated, persistent diarrhoea and pain in the right upper part of your abdomen are all symptoms suggestive of breast recurrence in the abdomen and will need investigating with blood tests and a CT scan.
Breathlessness/Cough
Increasing breathlessness that is not related to a recent cold or flu, recurrent chest infections that last longer than 3 weeks and a persistent cough are symptoms suggestive of a breast recurrence affecting the lungs and will need investigating with a chest x-ray or CT scan.

Head Symptoms
Persistent headaches (particularly in the morning), double vision and a feeling of sick are symptoms suggestive of a breast recurrence affecting the brain and will need investigating with a CT scan.

Symptoms that require urgent assessment
These are symptoms that may occur suddenly or change quickly and it is important that you seek urgent medical advice.
If they occur during office hours, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm, please contact your Breast Care Nurse.
If they occur out of these hours, please contact out of hours services via your GP or visit the Accident & Emergency Department at Hillingdon Hospital.

- Sudden onset breathlessness
- Coughing up lots of blood
- Weakness in your legs or arms
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Sudden swelling of an arm or leg

Late Side Effects of Treatment
If you have had radiotherapy or chemotherapy for your breast cancer, although quite rare, it is possible you may develop some side effects in the future.
If you develop increased swelling, pins and needles or weakness in the arm on the side of treatment please contact us.
If you are newly diagnosed with any of the following please contact us
  - A heart condition for example angina, heart failure, or have a heart attack.
  - Any type of blood clot in your veins or lungs.
  - Any other types of cancer.

Hormone Treatment
You may be having hormone treatment for your breast cancer. The duration of treatment is usually 5 years.

- If you are taking Tamoxifen occasionally the lining of your womb may become thicker, which can then cause you to experience vaginal bleeding/discharge. If this should happen then contact us or your GP who will refer you to a Gynaecologist to arrange an ultrasound of your womb.
- If you are taking an aromatase inhibitor (Anastrazole, letrozole or exemestane) you will need to have a bone density scan whilst on treatment to make sure your bones have not thinned or developed osteoporosis. Your GP will organise this test at the start of treatment and 2-3 years later.