

Physical Concerns – Appearance

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/appearance>

Each of us has a mental picture of how we look, our "self-image." Although we may not always like how we look, we're used to our self-image and accept it. But cancer and its treatment can change how you look and feel about yourself. Know you aren't alone in how you feel. Many others have similar feelings.

Body Changes during and after Treatment

Some body changes are short-term while others will last forever. Either way, your looks may be a big concern during or after treatment. For example, people with ostomies after colon or rectal surgery are sometimes afraid to go out. They worry about carrying equipment around or fear that it may leak. Some may feel ashamed or afraid that others will reject them. Even if others can't see them, your body changes may trouble you. Feelings of anger and grief about changes in your body are natural. Feeling bad about your body can also lower your sex drive. This loss may make you feel even worse about yourself. Changes in the way you look can also be hard for your loved ones, which in turn, can be hard on you.

Coping with Body Changes

How do you cope with body changes?

- Mourn your losses and know it's okay to feel sad, angry, and frustrated. Your feelings are real, and you have a right to grieve.
- Try to focus on the ways that coping with cancer has made you stronger, wiser, and more realistic.
- If your skin has changed from radiation, ask your doctor about ways you can care for it.
- Look for new ways to enhance your appearance. A new haircut, hair color, makeup, or clothing may give you a lift. If you're wearing a wig, you can take it to a hairdresser to shape and style.
- If you choose to wear a breast form (prosthesis), make sure it fits you well. Don't be afraid to ask the clerk or someone close to you for help. And check your health insurance plan to see if it will pay for it.

Coping with these changes can be hard. But, over time, most people learn to adjust to them and move forward. If you need to, ask your doctor to suggest a counselor who you can talk with about your feelings.

Staying Active

Many people find that staying active can help their self-image. Some things you can try are: Walking or running, Swimming, Playing a sport, Taking an exercise class, Weight training, Stretching or yoga. You may find that being active helps you cope with changes. It can reduce your stress and help you relax. It may also help you to feel stronger and more in control of your body. Start slowly if you need to and take your time. Talk with your doctor about ways you can stay active.

Hobbies and volunteer work can also help improve your self-image and self-esteem. You may like to read, listen to music, do crossword or other kinds of puzzles, garden or landscape, or write a blog, just to name a few. Or you could volunteer at a church or a local agency, or become a mentor or tutor, for example. You may find that you feel better about yourself when you get involved in helping others and doing things you enjoy.

Adapted from NIH / NCI: <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/self-image>

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society, Look Good Feel Better](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Self-Image and Cancer](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Teens, Coping with Changes to Your Body](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Young Adults, Cancer and Your Body](#)
- [NIH, NCI, Self-Image and Sexuality](#)
- [Chemocare, Hair Loss and Chemotherapy](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Hair Loss During Treatment](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Synthetic Wig Care and Resources](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Tips for Managing Hair Loss](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Prosthesis Resources](#)