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PET scans after cancer treatment

When you need them—and when you don't

If you've been treated for cancer, it's normal to want to do everything you can to be sure that it doesn't come back.

Your doctor will watch you closely for many years to check for a possible return of the cancer. To be extra sure, some doctors will order imaging tests, known as PET scans. They are often combined with CT scans. These scans take pictures of your body where cancer might be growing.

But you may not need the tests. And their risks may be greater than the benefits. Here's why:

PET and PET-CT scans usually don't help people who have completed cancer treatments and don't have symptoms.

For most cancers, these tests don't help you live longer or with a better quality of life. If you are scanned without a good reason, it can lead to anxiety, wrong diagnoses, false alarms, unnecessary procedures, and more costs.

Often, there are better ways to keep track of your condition:



- Be aware of symptoms that could mean cancer has returned.
- Get regular checkups that include a medical history and physical exam.
- For some cancers, there are simple tests you should get, such as mammograms for women who have been treated for breast cancer.
- Ask your doctor which test, if any, is right for your situation.

PET and PET-CT scans have risks.

Having PET and PET-CT scans can add to your stress as a cancer survivor. These tests often find health problems that are not serious. This may lead to more tests and procedures, including follow-up scans, and even biopsies and surgery.

Also, PET, and especially PET-CT scans, expose you to high levels of radiation. The effects of radiation add up over your lifetime. This can increase your risk of cancer. Multiple scans should not be done unless medical evidence shows that they would help. Ask your doctor if multiple scans are a good idea.

The tests are expensive.

A PET-CT scan can cost \$5,000 or more, according to one U.S. medical center. That does not include the cost of added tests and procedures due to false alarms. Some insurance plans do not pay for routine (surveillance) PET scans in a healthy patient who has completed cancer treatment.

So, when are PET scans a good idea after treatment?

A PET or PET-CT scan may be helpful if your doctor suspects your cancer has returned, based on your symptoms, a physical exam, or other tests. A scan may also be recommended if you were treated for advanced cancer and your doctor needs to find out if your most recent treatment was effective.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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