

# American Indian/ Alaska Native Cancer Survivorship



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**The purpose of this document is to provide a guide for American Indian/Alaska Native cancer survivors and caregivers on:**

- Understanding a survivorship care plan
- Managing life after treatment and continuing to live a healthy life
- Understanding late and long-term effects of cancer treatment
- Cancer survivor resources

This document is part of a series of information sheets developed by our University of Arizona, Partnership for Native American Cancer Prevention (NACP) Outreach team. More information is available at:

<https://www.fcm.arizona.edu/research/research-programs/partnership-native-american-cancer-prevention-nacp>

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) cancer patients have historically experienced the poorest 5-year cancer survival rates compared to other races.<sup>1</sup> However, due to continuing advances in medicines, treatments, and our understanding of cancer survivor needs, the survivorship rates are improving.<sup>2</sup> This guide is intended to help cancer survivors, their caregivers, and interested individuals to understand what actions and resources are available for long-term survivorship.

## *Who is a Cancer Survivor?*

The term “cancer survivor” applies to a person who has had a cancer diagnosis. Similarly, “cancer survivorship” usually refers to person’s navigating their life experiences and challenges resulting from their cancer diagnosis.<sup>3</sup> Both cancer survivor and survivorship can have varying meanings to different individuals<sup>4</sup> and can be very personal.

## *Cancer Survivorship Care*

It is very important for Cancer Survivors to continue to take care of themselves. A care plan can include:<sup>4,5</sup>

- Self-care focused on nutrition, physical activity, mental wellness, sleep, and traditional culture*
- Ongoing relationships with primary care doctors and oncology specialists, keeping their contact information readily available*
- Keeping up with medical records, including past medical records*
- Keeping cancer diagnosis and treatment summary documents on hand*
- Knowing possible long and/or short-term side effects*
- Scheduling regular ongoing cancer screening appointments*
- Noting any physical or behavioral changes in health, and following up with healthcare providers as needed*
- Reaching out to health care providers for any questions*

The survivorship care plan is a living document that can change. The plan should be revisited and updated on a regular basis. Make sure to have other family members be aware of your care plan and share with them how they can help.

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## Maintain Your Health

It is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle to prevent a cancer recurrence of the same cancer or of a new cancer from forming. Here are ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle:

**Nutrition** – Eat a balanced diet that includes 5-9 daily servings of fruit and vegetables, beans, whole grains, and food with low sodium and fat.<sup>5</sup> Through these foods, your body will get the nutrients it needs to keep your body healthy. Use My Native Plate as a guide to eat healthy,<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ihs.gov/diabetes/education-materials-and-resources/index.cfm?module=productDetails&productID=2468>



Similarly, it is important to drink water. One of the major benefits of drinking water is that it carries nutrients and oxygen to your cells. Water also gives the body energy, reduces headaches, and flushes toxins and waste products from your body.<sup>7</sup> Drink plenty of water!

**Exercise** – It is recommended to exercise for about 30 minutes a day.<sup>5</sup> Remember to start slow and only increase intensity when your body is ready. Exercise helps to keep a healthy weight, it boosts energy, improves heart health and mental health. Make sure to talk to your health care provider before starting a new exercise program to avoid injury.



**Mental Wellness** – The way we think, feel, and act can affect our mental wellness. It is important to learn to acknowledge our emotions and to find ways to cope with them. For cancer survivors, the fear of cancer coming back often leads to feeling isolated, worried, angry, and stress. As needed, make sure to seek professional help. We include some tips for mental wellness and a simple breathing exercise to keep stress at bay.

### Tips for Mental Wellness

- Talk with family and friends
- Join cancer survivor support groups
- Exercise
- Write in your journal
- Meditate/Breathing Exercises →

### 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise<sup>8</sup>

Try this technique to reduce stress, anxiety, and improve sleep

Inhale  
through your  
nose for 4  
seconds



Hold for 7  
seconds



Exhale  
through  
mouth for 8  
seconds

**Sleep** – Sleep is important to help the brain and body to function properly. It is recommended for adults to sleep 7-9 hours each night.<sup>9</sup> Getting enough sleep increases your quality of life, provides your body with time to rest and reset, and increases mental wellness.

**Traditional Culture** – Culture is important for Native people to remain holistically balanced. Staying grounded through prayers and ceremonies allows cancer survivors to remain positive while healing your mind, body, and spirit. Take time to incorporate your traditional practices in your daily life.

**Behaviors to Reduce Risk** – Some behaviors can increase your chances of developing illness and disease. Here we recommend some things to do to reduce behavior risks, for example, use sunscreen, wear a hat, wear long sleeve clothing, and sunglasses and limit your time in direct sunlight when outside to prevent sun damage. It is important to limit commercial tobacco use, non-prescription drug use, and alcohol use.<sup>10</sup>

### Understanding Side Effects of Cancer Treatment

Cancer survivors may experience side effects from cancer treatments, sometimes these side effects can occur months or years after treatment is completed. There may be some cancer survivors who do not experience any side effects.

## Examples of Side Effects of Cancer Treatment That May Occur After Treatment<sup>11</sup>

Chemotherapy	Radiation Therapy	Hormone Therapy	Targeted Therapy	Immunotherapy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Dental problems</li> <li>-Early menopause</li> <li>-Hearing loss</li> <li>-Heart problems</li> <li>-Other cancer risks</li> <li>-Infertility</li> <li>-Loss of taste</li> <li>-Lung disease</li> <li>-Nerve damage</li> <li>-Memory issues</li> <li>-Osteoporosis</li> <li>-Digestion problems</li> <li>-Reduced lung capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cavities &amp; tooth decay</li> <li>-Early menopause</li> <li>-Heart &amp; vascular problems</li> <li>-Hypothyroidism</li> <li>-Other cancer risks</li> <li>-Increased risk of stroke</li> <li>-Infertility</li> <li>-Intestinal problems</li> <li>-Lung disease</li> <li>-Lymphedema</li> <li>-Memory issues</li> <li>-Osteoporosis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Blood clots</li> <li>-Hot flashes</li> <li>-Other cancer risks</li> <li>-Menopausal symptoms</li> <li>-Osteoporosis</li> <li>-Sexual side effects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Blood clots</li> <li>-Heart &amp; vascular problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joint or muscle problems</li> </ul>

### Follow-Up Care

As cancer treatment is concluded, there will be fewer visits with the oncology doctor and cancer health team. Even as you see the oncologist less and less each year, regular visits with a primary care doctor need to continue. Keeping up with follow-up care is very important.

As part of follow-up care, the primary care doctor will review medical history and complete a physical exam, blood work, and refer for any needed follow-up tests to check for cancer recurrence. Examples of test that may be recommended are:<sup>5</sup>

- X-ray – A type of radiation called electromagnetic waves that takes pictures inside the body
- Computerized Tomography (CT) scan – Detailed X-ray images taken at different angles around the body
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) test – Pictures taken inside the body that uses strong magnetic fields

It is important to keep all follow-up appointments. If anything is concerning, please schedule an appointment right away. Don't hesitate to reach out to your primary care doctors for any questions.

### Cancer Screenings

Scheduling and keeping ongoing regular cancer screenings are also very important. Although survivors are in remission it is important to continue to monitor any cancer recurrence. Regular screenings can help detect the same or a new cancer early. Follow your doctor's recommendations and make sure to schedule your cancer screening tests.



## Resources

The **American Cancer Society** provides information and resources for patients, families, and caregivers, [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The **American Indian Cancer Foundation** aids with Native survivors, families, and caregivers,

[www.americanindiancancer.org](http://www.americanindiancancer.org)

The **American Institute for Cancer Research** provides resources to navigate questions about nutrition and lifestyle,

[www.aicr.org](http://www.aicr.org)

The **Cancer Care** provides free, professional support services for cancer survivors, [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)

The **Cancer.Net** provides information for cancer survivors, their friends, and family, [www.cancer.net/survivorship](http://www.cancer.net/survivorship)

The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Cancer Survivors** provide information and resources for cancer survivors, [www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/index.htm)

[www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/index.htm)

The **Children's Oncology Group Long-Term Follow-up Guidelines** provides long-term follow-up guidelines for

Survivors, of Childhood, Adolescent, and Young Adult Cancers, [www.survivorshipguidelines.org](http://www.survivorshipguidelines.org)

The **National Alliance on Mental Illness** provides mental health information and resources, [www.nami.org/Home](http://www.nami.org/Home)

The **National Cancer Institute** provides information about cancer survivorship, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

The **National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship (NCCS)** provides information and resources for cancer survivors,

[www.canceradvocacy.org/](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/)

## References

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<sup>2</sup>Cavanagh, B. M., Wakefield, C. E., McLoone, J. J., Garvey, G., & Cohn, R. J. (2015). Cancer survivorship services for indigenous peoples: where we stand, where to improve? A systematic review. *Journal of Cancer Survivors*, 2016(10), 330-341. DOI 10.1007/s11764-015-0479-2

<sup>3</sup>What is Cancer Survivorship? (2023). Cancer.Net. Retrieved February 20, 2023, from <https://www.cancer.net/survivorship/what-cancer-survivorship>

<sup>4</sup>Care planning for cancer survivors. (2022). National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship. Retrieved December 2, 2022, from <https://canceradvocacy.org/resources/care-planning-for-cancer-survivors/#toggle-id-1>

<sup>5</sup>Follow-up medical care. (2022). National Cancer Institute. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/survivorship/follow-up-care#:~:text=Follow%20Dup%20care%20for%20cancer,due%20to%20your%20cancer%20treatment>.

<sup>6</sup>Education Materials and Resources (Online Catalog). (2023). Indian Health Service. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.ihs.gov/diabetes/education-materials-and-resources/index.cfm?module=productDetails&productID=2468>

<sup>7</sup>Benefits of drinking water: Cancer fighting and more. (2023). Comprehensive Cancer Centers. Retrieved February 6, 2023, from <https://cccnevada.com/benefits-drinking-water-cancer-fighting/>

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<sup>8</sup>How to do the 4-7-8 breathing exercise. (2023). Cleveland Clinic. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from

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<sup>9</sup>Sleeping well. (2022). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from

<https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/healthy-living-guides/physical-health/sleep.htm#print>

<sup>10</sup>Risk factors for cancer. (2015). National Cancer Institute. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk>

<sup>11</sup>Cancer survivors: Late effects of cancer treatment. (2022). The Mayo Clinic. Retrieved December 2, 2022, from

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