

NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS: WEIGHT ISSUES AND CANCER

By Melissa, M. Thompson, MSW, LCSW

WHAT'S HAPPENING, WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

It's January. The celebrations of the holiday season are behind us. When attending those New Year's celebrations, or while on the phone with a good friend, you heard all about those resolutions your friends and loved ones have to make better versions of themselves in the new year. Some have joined the gym, others have started to diet, some have quit smoking and some have undertaken it all.

You look in the mirror and notice how much weight you have gained since your cancer treatment started months ago, and find yourself envying those who can make weight loss resolutions. Or, maybe your weight issues are caused by the inability to keep weight on during treatment. Either way, you'd like to find a way to have better control of your weight. Here is the big question: Can you make the resolution to make a better version of yourself safely while going through treatment for cancer?

Yes, you can.

First let's make one strong point before going forward:

Do not make changes to your diet or exercise routine without first discussing them in detail with your doctor.

This is not the time to count calories or to take on the fad diets others around you may be working with. The food you eat and the activity you undertake can make a difference in the effectiveness of your cancer treatment. Your medical team can help you understand what choices are safe for you at this time. Discuss any changes you are considering with them. They can help you take care of yourself and any treatment related weight issues you may be facing.

If you decide you are going to make changes in the foods you eat or the activity level you undertake, keep in mind that your goal is to make some lifestyle changes that will be with you after treatment is behind you.

Here are some common weight issues that cancer survivors face and some suggestions for coping with them:

WEIGHT LOSS

- ***This is the most expected side effect of treatment***

Traditionally, people associate chemotherapy with nausea and vomiting, which lead to weight loss. Side effects from chemotherapy and radiation treatment can cause nausea, fatigue and vomiting, and changes in the way foods taste.

- ***Medication management of side effects***

Because weight loss is often expected during treatment, cancer survivors do not discuss this topic with their medical team. They decide to "accept their fate" and "be strong". This is not necessary. There are many interventions your medical team can offer you to manage treatment side effects that impact your ability to keep weight on. Do not hesitate to discuss them with your team.

Sometimes cancer survivors are not utilizing medications that can help with nausea and vomiting effectively. Follow the instructions you are given by the treatment team and make sure they are aware if you are not getting relief. Often there are other options available to help you. If the cost of medication is an issue for you, assistance is available.

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- ***Emotions impact appetite during treatment***

Emotions impact appetite. Many of my clients have told me that coping with the emotional impact of their cancer diagnosis has been much more challenging than the physical side effects of treatment. Loss of appetite can come from the emotional impact of cancer. Again there are a number of treatment options available to address this issue. Working with a counselor who has specific training in oncology can help you process these emotions and find your equilibrium again.

- ***What you can do***

First, discuss your weight loss issues with your medical team. It is important for them to hear and understand your concerns. They are part of your support team while you are undergoing treatment. In addition, you may want to consider:

- Eating when it is time to eat, not based on when you feel hungry
- 5 to 6 smaller meals instead of your typical 3 meals a day
- Adding foods high in protein such as peanut butter home made protein shakes
- Consider adding nutritional supplement shakes such as Ensure and Boost
- Meeting with a registered dietician who is trained to work with eating issues faced by cancer survivors

WEIGHT GAIN

- ***This is often a surprising side effect of treatment***

The causes of weight gain during treatment stem from a variety of factors. These include medication side effects such as fluid retention and increased appetite, along with low energy, which leads to lower activity levels.

- ***Emotional eating***

As stated earlier, emotions impact appetite. Feeling out of control, ill from the side effects of treatment, and anxious or depressed can cause one to eat for comfort. Finding effective support for these issues is important to your long-term health strategy.

- ***What you can do***

First, discuss your weight gain issues with your medical team. It is important for them to hear and understand your concerns. They are part of your support team while you are undergoing treatment. In addition, you may want to consider:

- Eating 5 portions of fruits and vegetables a day
- Focus on eating high fiber foods
- Use caution when eating foods high in fat or high in salt
- Find some social support – find someone to be active with
- Meeting with a registered dietician who is trained to work with eating issues faced by cancer survivors. They can help you plan healthy meals that meet your needs and your taste preferences.

SUPPORT

Whether you are concerned about weight loss or gain during your treatment, support is available. Support groups for survivors, meeting with a registered dietician who can help you plan healthy meals that meet your need and taste preferences, and working with a counselor trained in oncology can help you work through cancer related weight issues.

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