

# WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES, SECONDARY CONDITIONS AND BREAST CANCER TREATMENTS

*Women with disabilities face many challenges, including the management of secondary conditions as a result of their primary disabilities. Breast cancer treatments can make these challenges more difficult, since treatment may cause short-term and long-term side effects. However, there are strategies to help monitor the impact of breast cancer treatment side effects that may affect disability and secondary conditions.*

## What is a secondary condition caused by a primary disability?

- A physical, medical, cognitive, emotional or psychosocial condition directly caused by an existing medical condition or disability.
- Researchers and healthcare professionals believe that some secondary conditions can be prevented or decreased by a combination of health maintenance practices, eliminating environmental barriers, and improved healthcare access. However, other conditions are part of having a specific disability and can be managed but not prevented.
- In one study of women with physical disabilities, the average number of secondary conditions was 13 per woman, 5 of which were rated as severe or chronic. Secondary conditions are very common in people with disabilities and need to be managed while undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

Examples of common secondary conditions that happen because of a disability may include:

- Arthritis
- Cardiovascular conditions
- Depression
- Fatigue
- High blood pressure
- Joint pain
- Learning disabilities
- Obesity/weight gain
- Pressure sores
- Respiratory infections
- Social isolation
- Urinary tract infections

A secondary condition can be temporary or permanent. It can be acute or chronic.



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## Secondary conditions and breast cancer treatments

Before you start breast cancer treatment

- Tell your health care provider about all your health conditions, whether or not you think they are related to your disability. Your health care provider needs to understand your medical status so he/she may properly manage your breast cancer treatment.
- Your healthcare provider will consider how your disability and secondary conditions can influence the treatment options available to you.
- Your healthcare provider will develop a treatment plan based on your disability, risk factors, secondary conditions and possible treatment side effects.

## Why breast cancer treatment may affect my disability and secondary conditions

- Breast cancer treatment often causes side effects. Some women have very few side effects of treatment and some have many more. The degree of side effects has no relation to whether or not the treatment is working.
- Side effects occur because cancer cells can grow and divide quicker than normal cells. Many anti-cancer drugs (chemotherapy) are made to kill growing cells. Chemotherapy can also affect normal and healthy cells that grow quickly. Damage to normal cells can cause side effects.
- Some side effects can worsen some secondary conditions, such as fatigue.

## What are some examples of breast cancer treatment side effects that may affect my disability and secondary conditions?

- Women going through breast cancer treatment may be more tired than normal, more nauseous, have tingling in their toes and fingers, joint pain, swelling in the arm(s), and experience a variety of other symptoms specific to the drugs they are taking. While you are going through chemotherapy, you will receive ongoing blood tests to make sure your body is handling the treatments.
- Radiation is usually given daily for about 6 weeks, so the skin may become sore towards the end of the treatment. Women getting radiation treatment may need special creams to help maintain their skin so it does not break down or become infected. With the right creams, the skin will look just like it did before the radiation treatment. It is important for you and your healthcare provider to take care of your skin during treatment.

## What are aromatase inhibitors?

- Drugs (daily pill) that some women often take for up to five years after they finish breast cancer treatment. If you are taking an aromatase inhibitor (Tamoxifen, Arimidex) after finishing either radiation or chemotherapy treatment, you may have additional side effects, such as increased joint pain and elevated cholesterol. It is important that you tell your healthcare provider about any additional symptoms you are having. These symptoms may affect your health and your disability.
- Since aromatase inhibitors and chemotherapy may cause loss of bone mass, it is important to have a bone density test. This painless test to check for bone loss is a very important follow up test for women with disabilities, who may already be experiencing bone loss due to their original disability and secondary conditions. There are medicines you can take to help prevent bone loss.

**REMEMBER--**Be sure and ask your health care provider about how to manage the symptoms related to cancer treatment. Let your healthcare provider know about any changes you have in managing your disability, secondary conditions, or your general health.

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**For more information, please contact Komen Project Coordinator at 301-545-6140 x203 or visit our website at [www.aahd.us](http://www.aahd.us)**

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