

ASK, LISTEN, CONNECT

A primary care tool with key resources to help connect young adult cancer survivors

CASE STUDY & KEY CLINICAL QUESTIONS

An analysis of a Young Adult Cancer Canada survey shows that adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer survivors would like their primary care providers to be more proactive in helping them understand and manage their health after completing their cancer treatment. This fictitious story is based on real experiences of cancer survivors and explores some of the top issues AYAs say they want to discuss with their primary care providers, and the questions that you, as the primary care provider, could ask to help encourage these conversations.

Sara, a 32 year old woman, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her treatment included chemotherapy, breast-conserving surgery and radiation. She is now cancer-free and is visiting her primary care provider for follow-up care after completing all treatments and being discharged from the cancer centre.

Here are some things to keep in mind as Sara's primary care provider. Although Sara's story is fictitious, the quotes included are from real AYA cancer survivors.

LISTEN AND BE PROACTIVE: Sara wants her primary care provider to be knowledgeable about the issues and concerns she is facing after treatment including the late and lasting effects of cancer. She wants her provider to take the time to listen to her needs, challenges, and symptoms, and take her concerns seriously. Sara accepts that her health care provider may not always have the answers, but is willing to listen and help connect her to the things she needs.

How can I find happiness if I can't do some of the activities I loved in the past?

Are my feelings normal?

Questions to ask

- I may not have the answer at my fingertips, but I want to help understand what is bothering you most today so we can get you what you need
- How has your treatment affected you physically in ways I may not be aware of?
- How has your cancer diagnosis or treatment affected your mental health?

Not everyone recovers at the same rate and physical recovery is one thing, mental and emotional is another.

Is there a cancer support group for people in my age range?

What are some affordable options for counselling or therapy?

ASK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH: Sara has been feeling anxious about many things in her life since her treatment ended. She has been feeling isolated and down lately seeing all of her friends advancing in their careers, getting married and starting families. She has been struggling with her finances and is worried about her future, including a fear of the cancer recurring. She doesn't know if these feelings are normal, or what she can or should do to feel better.

Questions to ask

- How is your mood today? Have you been feeling sad or worried?
- What, if anything, have you been doing that helps you feel better?
- Can I connect you with resources to help with your mental health?

ASK ABOUT PHYSICAL SIDE EFFECTS AND SYMPTOMS: Since her treatment, Sara has been feeling very tired and has been struggling with confusion and poor memory. She wonders if these things are normal, how long they will last, and what she could do to help address them.

When does brain fog from chemotherapy go away?

Is there any kind of support available for people with reduced cognitive function? Do I just have to tough it out?

Questions to ask

- Are you experiencing any fatigue or tiredness?
- Do you sometimes get confused or have trouble remembering things? Do you struggle with concentration?
- If so, what are the biggest challenges in your daily life related to these side effects?
- Can I connect you with resources to help with your side effects and symptoms?

Where I didn't feel I had enough help...was body image issues as well as sexual health...it took years for this to be taken seriously.

Where can I access support for concerns with sexual activity?

Can I see an OB/GYN as I want to know information about pregnancy after cancer?

ASK ABOUT SEXUAL FUNCTION AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY: Since her treatment, Sara has experienced a decline in her sexual desire and sexual activity. She is also having trouble accepting the changes to her body from her treatment. She is not sure how to handle these concerns.

Questions to ask

- People that have gone through cancer treatment may experience changes to their sexuality or sexual activity. Have there been any changes to your physical or mental health that affects your sexual activity?
- Are you able to have the intimate and sexual relationships you want? If not, what are your concerns?
- Has your cancer experience led to concerns for you about your ability to have biological children?

ASK ABOUT RETURNING TO WORK OR SCHOOL: Before her cancer diagnosis, Sara had a busy career. She took time off during her treatment and has been working part-time for the last few months. She has been struggling with her finances and would like to return to work full-time but she is experiencing some challenges at work related to her ability to concentrate. Sara is wondering if she will ever be able to return to full-time work, and what she needs to think about in making this decision.

How do I know when I'm ready?

How do I return to school, and who do I talk to, to get set up?

I have some limitations at work... Still don't know how to deal with it...

What are my employee rights? How long can an accommodation plan be in place?

Questions to ask

- Recovery and adjusting to life after cancer can be challenging. Patients often reintegrate back to work and school at their own pace. Have you thought about or started the process of going back to work or school?
- What are your biggest concerns about returning to work or school?
- Now that you are back to work or school, how is that going for you?

I don't even know when I should start breast cancer screenings...

If my cancer comes back will it be caught quicker this time?

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT CANCER RISK AND THE SCREENING AND MONITORING PROCESS: Sara is wondering what she needs to think about to reduce her risk of cancer recurrence and make sure she has all the necessary monitoring and screening tests she needs. She wants to know when and how screening will occur and who is responsible for this process.

Questions to ask

- Given your particular cancer and risks of getting cancer in the future, do you have any questions or suggestions about our screening and monitoring plan?
- What information would be most helpful for you about cancer risk and future monitoring and screening?

RESOURCES & SUPPORTS

MENTAL HEALTH

Young Adult Cancer Canada
Cancer Information Helpline
CancerConnection.ca
Canadian Virtual Hospice

Queering Cancer
Pink Pearl (women's specific resource)
BounceBack-CMHA

PHYSICAL SIDE EFFECTS AND SYMPTOMS

Cancer Information Helpline
Brain Fog -Wellspring
Cancer.ca

Cancer Chat Canada -de Souza Institute
Cancer Related Fatigue -Well-spring

SEXUAL FUNCTION and SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Cancer.ca
Fertile Future

RETURN TO WORK OR SCHOOL

Cancer and Work
Return to Work -Wellspring
Money Matters -Wellspring

Canadian Cancer Survivor Network

CANCER RISK, SCREENING and MONITORING

Cancer Information Helpline
The Healing Journey -Wellspring
Cancer.ca