

Breastfeeding After Breast Cancer

After the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, some adults may want to become pregnant as well as breastfeed. Below, we provide information to consider about breastfeeding after treatment for breast cancer, and we also recommend discussing your specific situation with your oncology care team.

For those who want to breastfeed, the most recent information tells us that it is both possible and safe to do so after breast cancer. While some treatments, like surgery and radiation, can impair the ability to breastfeed, most who have at least one remaining breast can breastfeed if they desire to do so. Those who have been treated with a lumpectomy and radiation will likely experience reduced milk production on the treated side(s). Fortunately, a single untreated breast can actually produce enough breast milk to support the needs of a healthy infant. After limited breast or nipple surgery (including augmentation, lifts, and reductions), breasts can often produce some breast milk, though supply may be limited. Many breast cancer survivors have reported varying experiences and challenges with breastfeeding depending on prior treatment type. In a recent study of young survivors who gave birth after breast cancer treatment, 55% of them reported breastfeeding.

For those with inherited mutations in BRCA1 and/or BRCA2 genes, the decision to breastfeed may be more complicated given the potential desire to undergo bilateral mastectomy to reduce risk of future new breast cancer in the breasts. Recent research has shown that breastfeeding after an early-stage breast cancer diagnosis and treatment is safe in BRCA mutation carriers. There has been no evidence suggesting an increase in the risk of cancer returning or new breast cancers. Other research has shown that breastfeeding has a positive impact regarding long-term protection against ovarian cancer among those with BRCA mutations. Among BRCA mutation carriers who gave birth after a breast cancer diagnosis in a recent study, about 20% chose to breastfeed.



Breastfeeding Challenges and Overcoming Them

According to a recent study, most young breast cancer survivors who attempted to breastfeed were able to and were satisfied with their experience. Specifically, 69% had undergone lumpectomy and radiation, most of whom (83%) reported no milk production from their treated breast. The other 17% experienced diminished milk production from the treated breast compared to the untreated breast. Nevertheless, 65% of study participants reported that they were at least somewhat satisfied with their ability to breastfeed. Participants breastfed for an average of 6 months. Common reasons for stopping breastfeeding included: to start/resume hormone therapy for their breast cancer, to resume breast cancer screening tests such as mammograms, inadequate latching, and infant dissatisfaction.

While breast cancer survivors might encounter unique challenges while breastfeeding, there are ways to overcome them. Parents report using a breast pump on one or both breast(s), hand expression, and taking supplements to increase milk production such as fenugreek, goat rue, holle, gentlease, herbal tea, “Mother’s Milk®”, and “lactation cookies”, among others. It is not clear how well these actually work, and there is little research to guide the use of these approaches. Parents may also supplement with infant formula or pasteurized human donor milk. Triple feeding, where an individual directly

breastfeeds, then pumps, then breastfeeds again to help increase supply has also been shown to be helpful in some cases.

Talk To Your Doctor Or Other Healthcare Providers, Including A Lactation Specialist

Breastfeeding counseling and support can be introduced before, during, or after pregnancy, providing individualized support for each individual person's diagnosis and treatment plan. Continuing mental health and social support, such as talk therapy, can be helpful for those who are struggling with breastfeeding after completing treatment for breast cancer.

Additional Resources

- [American Cancer Society – Pregnancy and Breastfeeding after Breast Cancer](#)
- [American Society of Breast Surgeons – Resource Guide on Oncolactation](#)
- [Breastcancer.org – Breastfeeding after Breast Cancer Treatment Seems Safe](#)
- [Breast Cancer Now – Breastfeeding and Breast Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Cancer Journal – Breastfeeding experiences among young breast cancer survivors: A survey study](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) – Breast Surgery and Breastfeeding](#)
- [Cleveland Clinic – Breastfeeding Cuts Ovarian Cancer Risk in BRCA Mutation Carriers](#)
- [Dana-Farber Cancer Institute – Young and Strong Program](#)
- [International Lactation Consultant Association – Consultant search](#)
- [La Leche League International – Diagnostic Tests, Procedures, and Treatment while Breastfeeding](#)
- [Living Beyond Breast Cancer – Breastfeeding after treatment](#)
- [New England Journal of Medicine – Interrupting Endocrine Therapy to Attempt Pregnancy after Breast Cancer](#)
- [MD Anderson Cancer Center – Can you breastfeed after cancer treatment?](#)
- [Rutgers Cancer Institute – Breastfeeding is Safe for Breast Cancer Survivors of Reproductive Age](#)