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## Managing side-effects – Weight Changes

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**Some women experience one or more side-effects from taking hormone therapy, others do not.** There is no way to predict who will experience side-effects, and who won't.

It's important not to assume that any unwanted effect you might be experiencing after breast cancer is solely due to hormone therapy. There are a range of possible causes, such as other treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) or medicines. The normal ageing process and the menopause can also account for some symptoms women can experience. So stopping hormone therapy would not necessarily mean symptoms would disappear.

**Side-effects can vary in level of intensity and this can change over time;** a side-effect may become less frequent or intense or disappear altogether as time goes on. Again, it's not possible to predict whether this will happen to you. **Rather than looking at all the side effects now, you may find it helpful to come back to this page if and when your side effects change.**

The good news is that **there are many things that can help with side-effects.** This section includes information about some of the most common side-effects women can experience, and a range of tips and hints for managing these.

This section includes information on the following topics:

- Coping with weight gain
- What can help you to manage your weight or prevent weight gain?
- Further help and support

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### Weight Changes

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Some women have concerns that taking hormone therapy can cause changes to their weight, particularly around their middle. However, we don't know for sure whether weight changes, or changes in body shape, following breast cancer are due to taking hormone therapy; they could also be due to effects of other cancer treatments (e.g., chemotherapy), lifestyle changes following diagnosis, or other factors such as genetics, getting older, or sleeping badly and feeling tired (which can lead to eating more).

Not all women who take hormone therapy gain weight. For those who do, the good news is that you can successfully lose weight whilst taking hormone therapy. You can also take steps to help prevent or minimise weight gain and maintain a healthy weight.

### Why is a healthy weight important?

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There is growing evidence from research studies that managing your weight may play a role in reducing the chances of breast cancer coming back (recurrence) and improve long-term survival following breast cancer.

There are also some suggestions from research studies that some hormone therapies may work less well in heavier women. However, the reasons for this are not clear.

Being heavier is also linked to some side-effects of hormone therapy. For example, women who are heavier can have worse hot flushes or joint aches and pains.

Being a healthy weight can also help to reduce your risk of developing other health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

### Coping with weight gain

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Regardless of why weight gain might occur, it can impact on your mood and the way you think about yourself and your body.

**Changes in body weight and shape can be difficult to manage**, especially alongside other side effects of hormone therapy. Many women describe how weight changes impact how they think and feel about their body, and how they feel that others see them, which often relates to self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence.

Changes in body weight and shape can have different impacts on different people. Learning how to cope with, and manage, changes in your body shape and size can help with building up your self-confidence. **There are some things that can help with this.**

### Changing the way you think about weight gain

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Changes in your body shape and size can take time to adapt and adjust to. But identifying and managing your thinking about your body can often be a helpful way to help you to cope and respond in helpful ways.

For example, some women describe thoughts such as: “Everyone is looking at me”, “I don’t look how I used to”, “I will never lose this weight”, or “It’s my fault I’ve gained weight”.

If you start to have negative thoughts like these about your body, try to pause and recognise them. Then try to “reframe” your thinking (change the way you are thinking about this) by providing a self-soothing response. You may find it helpful to try to shift your focus away from what your body looks like, and instead focus on what your body does and is capable of. Examples of “reframing” thoughts might include - “I am proud of my body for getting me through treatment” or “My body lets me go out for a walk with my family and enjoy the fresh air”.

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### Talking to others

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Talking to those around you such as a partner, friends or family can be really important in helping you to cope with changes in your body weight and shape. People may not realise the impact that these changes might be having on you, and so speaking with others can help them to understand how you feel, and how they can best support you.

You can read more about how to go about talking to others about these types of things in the **Help and support** section of the HT&Me website.

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### What can help you to manage your weight or prevent weight gain?

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This section contains some advice on how you can reach and/or maintain a healthy weight.

Trying to make lifestyle changes when you don’t feel your best can be hard, especially when you are coping with the other physical and emotional effects of breast cancer and its treatment.

If you don’t feel up to it, it is important to try to not feel guilty for not making lifestyle changes to manage your weight. However, if you do feel unhappy with your weight and would like to change it, there are some changes that you can make to your daily lifestyle that can help you to lose weight. These suggestions can also be helpful to prevent or limit any further changes in weight. You might also find it helpful to set some goals for yourself – you can do this in My Goals and Plans or Healthy Eating sections.

## Having a healthy diet

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Eating a healthy diet can have a range of health benefits, including helping to achieve a healthy body weight.

To lose weight, aim to reduce your calorie intake. You could do this by:

- cutting your portion size
- limiting unhealthy snacks
- cutting out high energy and calorific drinks (such as fizzy drinks and alcohol).

You can find more information about what a healthy diet is, why it is important and hints and tips to stick to one in the Healthy Eating section of the HT&Me website which can be found within Healthy Living, Healthy Mind.

## Keeping active

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Regular physical activity, and keeping active in your day-to-day life, can help you to maintain a healthy weight. There are simple changes that can be introduced into your life to increase your level of activity - for example, doing some gardening or getting off the bus a stop earlier than needed.

*"Keeping physically fit has been extremely important - regular walking and swimming, and the 5k park run, has helped a lot with managing both weight gain and mental health. I also found that after surviving surgery and chemo, I was a lot less fearful generally, more willing to take a risk and have learned to horse-ride, something I'd always been too nervous to do."*

Jo, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 53

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You can find more information, and hints and tips about keeping active in the **Being Active** section of the HT&Me website.

## Getting support with your weight

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- Joining these **weight loss support programmes** such as Weight Watchers and Slimming World have been shown to be effective sources of support to women who wish to lose weight. The structure and the social support can be very helpful, especially if you might struggle because of breast

cancer circumstances. To find out who your local provider is, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Weight-loss-support-groups/LocationSearch/1429>

- Another useful source of support is the **free 12-week NHS Better Health weight loss plan** that you can download as an app for your smartphone or tablet. You can use this to set weight loss goals, use the BMI calculator to customise your plan, plan your meals, make healthier food choices, get more active and burn more calories and record your activity and progress. To find out more and download this, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight/>

Making and sticking to these changes can be difficult. See below for some hints and tips on how you can stick to those changes.

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### How can I stick to these changes?

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Here are some hints and tips on things that can be helpful for managing any impact of cancer on weight and maintaining lifestyle changes over time – these come from other women who have taken hormone therapy, and from scientific research.

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#### Keep a routine

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Eating meals at roughly the same time every day can help to reduce snacking and unplanned meals.

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#### Make plans

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If we make a clear plan to do something, our chances of actually doing it increase. **Try to make clear plans including details such as the time, situation and place, rather than just stating the desired end goal.** For example, rather than “I plan to do more exercise”, try making a more detailed and specific plan such as “I will walk up the stairs to work, rather than taking the lift”, and rather than “I will eat more healthily”, try “I will make a healthy packed lunch to take to work, rather than ordering from the canteen”. This helps your plan to be more easily accessible in your memory.

You could make a plan (also called a goal) such as this in the Being Active and Healthy Eating sections of the HT&Me website, which can be found within Healthy Living, Healthy Mind.

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### Be realistic

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Introducing lots of changes to your lifestyle at the same time can be difficult and makes it harder to stick to them. Try introducing one or two small changes and see how you manage with those. Give yourself time to get used to those changes and don't give up the first time you slip. When you feel confident with those, try to add in another and see how it goes.

Something is better than nothing!

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### Cut down, rather than cut out

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Lifestyle changes that last are often about balance. Cutting out all of our favourite foods and drinks such as those high in fat, salt and sugar often makes us want them more, and is therefore unlikely to be maintained over time. Instead - try to cut down and limit your intake.

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## Further help and support

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### **What should I do if these problems are really impacting on my life?**

If these hints and tips do not help and your weight becomes very problematic for you and badly impacts on your day-to-day life, it is important to talk to your breast cancer team or GP. They may be able to suggest something which will help.

### **Support from Breast Cancer Now Nurses**

You may find it helpful to use the confidential '**Ask our nurses**' email service on the Breast Cancer Now website, especially if you find it difficult to talk to someone in person. To access this, type this weblink into your browser:

<https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/support-you/email-our-nurses>

### **Where can I speak to other women?**

You do not have to cope with problems with your weight on your own. You may find it helpful to join online forums and support groups to talk to other women who are in a similar situation to you. One example of this is the Breast Cancer Now online forum. To take a look, type this weblink into your browser:

<https://forum.breastcancernow.org/>

### **Other websites and resources**

Here are links to other websites and reading you may find helpful. Just type the weblinks into your browser:

- To go to Breast Cancer Now: <https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/facing-breast-cancer/living-beyond-breast-cancer/your-body/healthy-eating-after-treatment-breast-cancer>
- To go to Macmillan Cancer Support: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/changes-in-weight>.
- To go to Prevent Breast Cancer: <https://preventbreastcancer.org.uk/about-breast-cancer/causes-and-risk-factors/weight/>.

If you feel that you have tried everything and the side-effects are still unbearable, do talk to your breast cancer team or GP who will be able to help you decide what to do. Often, they will be able to switch you to another form of hormone therapy or prescribe an additional treatment to help you. If that still doesn't work, the best decision for you might be to stop taking hormone therapy. Ultimately it is a personal decision taking into account the risks and benefits and what is right for you.