

04 MAR, 2026

What's next after beating cervical cancer?

New Straits Times, Malaysia

Page 1 of 2

What's next after beating cervical cancer?

BEATING cervical cancer after enduring a storm of treatments is a triumph, but life afterwards comes with new questions, hopes and challenges.

How long will follow-up care last? Will life return to normal? What about fertility, intimacy or the fear of cancer returning?

Once treatment, whether surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy or a combination of them is completed, survivors enter a crucial phase called surveillance, says Columbia Asia Hospital-Bukit Jalil consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Khoo Boom Ping.

This structured follow-up programme monitors recovery, detects recurrence early and supports long-term health.

For the first two years, doctor's visits typically occur every three to four months, then every six months from years three to five, and annually after five years if no recurrence is found, he adds.

These visits may include pelvic exams, pap smears, HPV tests, imaging such as CT, MRI or PET scans and relevant blood tests.

"Many women feel anxious while waiting for results. This is normal. Psychological support during this period can be valuable."

RETURNING TO NORMAL

Returning to a fulfilling, active life after cervical cancer is possible, but recovery involves both physical healing and

emotional adjustment, says Dr Khoo.

Physical recovery varies. After surgery, healing may take four to eight weeks, longer if a radical hysterectomy or lymph node removal was performed, while after chemoradiation, fatigue, bowel and bladder changes and vaginal dryness may persist for several months.

"Emotionally, survivors may experience anxiety, depression or a changed sense of identity."

Some feel guilty for surviving, others overwhelmed by fear of recurrence. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and seek support from oncology counsellors or survivor groups.

Work may resume gradually, social and family roles may shift and body image and intimacy often require time and open communication to rebuild, he explains.

Fertility is one of the most sensitive topics after treatment. Whether pregnancy is possible depends on the treatment type. Fertility-sparing surgeries such as a radical trachelectomy may preserve the uterus, while radiotherapy or radical hysterectomy generally result in infertility.

"Early fertility counselling is crucial for women of reproductive age, with options such as egg or embryo freezing before treatment," says Dr Khoo.

Sexual health can also change due to vaginal dryness, tightness, pain after radiotherapy, reduced libido from hormonal or emotional factors and body image concerns.

Honest communication with part-

ners and guidance from gynaecologists or sexual health counsellors can offer solutions.

MANAGING SIDE EFFECTS

Dr Khoo says some women will experience lingering side effects, such as fatigue, urinary or bowel dysfunction, lymphedema of the legs due to lymph node removal or vaginal stenosis.

These can be managed through gradual physical activity, pelvic floor therapy, regular vaginal care and stretching exercises and, in the case of lymphedema, compression stockings and massage.

Menopausal symptoms are also common, particularly for women whose ovaries were removed or who underwent pelvic radiotherapy. Sudden menopause can cause hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, mood swings, sleep disturbances and low libido.

While hormone replacement therapy may not be suitable for all, non-hormonal options such as antidepressants, vaginal moisturisers, lubricants,



The HPV vaccine protects against the viruses commonly linked to cervical cancer. PICTURE CREDIT: FREEPIK

QUICK FACTS

RED FLAGS!

Awareness of warning signs is also important, as most cancer recurrences happen within two to three years of treatment. Knowing the signs can lead to earlier intervention.

These include:

- New or persistent pelvic pain
- Unusual vaginal bleeding or discharge
- Leg swelling on one side
- Changes in bowel or bladder habits
- Unexplained weight loss or fatigue

All of the above warrant prompt medical evaluation. Trusting one's instincts and seeking medical attention early can make a difference.

Regular cervical cancer screening — through pap smears and HPV testing — remains the most powerful tool in preventing or catching cancer early.

When detected early, treatment is simpler, less invasive and far more successful.

Equally important is the HPV vaccine, which protects against the viruses most commonly linked to cervical cancer.



Returning to a fulfilling, active life after cervical cancer is possible, but recovery involves both physical healing and emotional adjustment, says Columbia Asia Hospital-Bukit Jalil consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Khoo Boom Ping. PICTURE CREDIT: COLUMBIA ASIA HOSPITAL — BUKIT JALIL

support groups.

"Empathy, therapy and a strong support network can ease this burden."

NUTRITION AND EXERCISE

Lifestyle choices play a significant role in recovery and long-term health. A balanced diet rich in vegetables, fruits, lean proteins and whole grains, combined with limiting processed foods and red meat, supports well-being.

Regular exercise — such as 150 minutes of moderate activity per week — can boost energy, while quitting smoking reduces the risk of cervical and other cancers.

Stress management through mindfulness, yoga, hobbies or spiritual practices enhances both mental and physical resilience, adds Dr Khoo.

"Though no lifestyle can guarantee prevention of recurrence, healthy habits strengthen immunity, improve energy levels and sharpen mental clarity."

meera@nst.com.my

Open discussions with healthcare providers are essential to finding safe, personalised strategies. PICTURE CREDIT: STEFAMERPIK — FREEPIK



acupuncture and lifestyle changes can provide relief.

"Discussions with healthcare providers are essential to finding safe, personalised strategies. With proper support, many women adapt well to this new phase of life," says Dr Khoo.

The emotional aftermath is often one of the most overlooked aspects of recovery. Fear of recurrence, survivor's guilt, strained relationships and diminished self-esteem are common experiences.

Dr Khoo says anxiety tends to spike before follow-up appointments and many women find comfort in speaking to cancer counsellors or joining



04 MAR, 2026

What’s next after beating cervical cancer?

New Straits Times, Malaysia

SUMMARIES

Awareness of warning signs is also important, as most cancer recurrences happen within two to three years of treatment. Knowing the signs can lead to earlier intervention. These include: • New or persistent pelvic pain • Unusual vaginal bleeding or discharge • Leg swelling on one side • Changesin bowel or bladder habits • Unexplained weight loss or fatigue All of the above warrant prompt medical evaluation.