Managing anxiety after cancer treatment

For cancer survivors

After your cancer treatment has ended, it takes time to adjust. Many patients have feelings of anxiety. These fears and worries can affect your quality of life and your family. They can also make it hard to cope with life after treatment.

Read this handout to learn about:

• what anxiety is
• how long it lasts
• what you can do to reduce it
• when to talk to your doctor
• where to get more information
What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear. It is a normal response to threat or stress. Anxiety is a common feeling for patients and families coping with cancer.

You may have anxiety from being diagnosed with cancer or as you transition to follow-up care.

You may feel worried about:
- the future
- your health
- being able to control events in life
- changes in how you look
- cancer returning

This anxiety is normal.

You may also worry about your family and relationships:
- changes in relationships with loved ones
- being able to continue family duties
- fear of increased dependence on loved ones

All of these concerns may overwhelm you. Even mild anxiety can affect your quality of life and your family.
What are the signs of anxiety?

- Trouble concentrating on tasks or solving problems
- Being nervous, feeling tense or restless
- Trembling and shaking
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep (waking up in the middle of the night)
- Headaches, neck or shoulder pain/tightness
- Feeling tired or fatigue most of the time
- Feeling angry and losing patience with others

Anxiety can increase pain. It may even cause nausea and vomiting.

What causes anxiety?

We do not know the exact cause of anxiety. Some people are more likely to feel anxious than others.

Traumatic events in your life can trigger anxiety. While this isn’t true for everyone, it seems to be the case for people who are more likely to be anxious.

How long will it last?

Your worries may get worse over time if you do not get help. See your doctor for help. Your doctor might refer you to a mental health provider to help you manage your anxiety before it gets worse. It may be easier to treat if you address it early.
What can I do?

Here are a few tips to help you handle your anxiety.

1. Physical Activity
   Exercising regularly can keep you healthy and is also a great way to reduce stress. For best results, set up a regular routine and exercise most days of the week (5 or 6 days). Remember to start out slowly. Try exercising every other day for about 15 minutes. Then slowly increase the amount of exercise and how hard you are working.

   You can also choose to attend the Lebed Healthy-Steps class offered at ELLICSR (Toronto General Hospital, Basement). To learn more please call 416-505-5578.

2. Eat healthy foods
   Avoid foods that are high in fat or sugar. Also avoid processed foods. Some examples of foods to avoid are: burgers, fries, sodas, sugary drinks, sweets and desserts.

   Try to eat foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids and B vitamins. Some examples are: fish oil, nuts, flaxseed, brussel sprouts, kale, spinach, and salad greens. Meat and dairy products are other sources.

   The Survivor’s Kitchen: Cooking for Health and ELLICSR Kitchen: From Plant to Plate are two programs run by a chef and registered dietician offered at ELLICSR to help you chose nutritious foods that are delicious and easy to prepare. For more information visit ELLICSRkitchen.ca or call 416 581 8620.

3. Alcohol and other sedatives
   Avoid these because they can make anxiety worse.
4. **Sleep**
   Make sure you are getting enough sleep and that you are sleeping well. If you are having trouble sleeping, you should talk to your doctor.

   Princess Margaret Cancer Centre offers free relaxation sessions. For more information please call 416 946 4501 extension 5580 to learn more about Relaxation Therapy Sessions offered by Occupational Therapists.

5. **Relax**
   Take time to relax every day. Yoga, visualization and meditation are some examples. These relaxation techniques can help reduce anxiety. Find what works best for you. Relaxing before bedtime can also help you sleep better.

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6. **Smoking and drinking coffee**
   Both nicotine and caffeine can worsen anxiety. Quit smoking and cut back on the number of cups you have per day.

7. **Let feelings out**
   It is okay to feel sad, disappointed and frustrated. Talk about your feelings and fears and those of your family members so that they are aware of how you feel and can provide support when you need it.

8. **Spirituality**
   Use prayer, meditation, or other types of spiritual support.

   Spirituality through Tale & Tape is a program offered at ELLICSR that helps people understand their journey through short movie clips. For more information, please call 416 581 8620.
9. Get professional help
Sometimes you may need help from people outside of your family and loved ones.

Get help through counseling and support groups. Refer to the resources at the end of this pamphlet to find a resource that is right for you.

When should I see a doctor about my anxiety?

Check ✔ off any box if it applies to you.

My anxiety often:

☐ stops me from doing things I enjoy
☐ makes it hard for me to do my work
☐ makes it hard to visit or socialize with people
☐ makes it hard to take care of my family
☐ makes it harder to do activities I can usually do easily
☐ makes it harder to concentrate
☐ makes me so tired it affects my emotions and feelings
☐ worries me

If you have checked off any boxes, you should talk to your doctor.
How do I talk to my doctor about my anxiety?

Do not feel embarrassed to talk to your doctor. Remember that your doctor is used to talking about these types of problems.

Before you see your doctor, think about how anxiety is affecting your life.

Ask yourself these 3 questions:

1. Is my anxiety making it hard for me to enjoy my life? In what way?
   ______________________________________________
   ______________________________________________

2. How bad is my anxiety?
   ______________________________________________
   ______________________________________________

3. What are the most stressful symptoms of my anxiety?
   ______________________________________________
   ______________________________________________

Take this booklet with you when you go to see your doctor. Talk to your doctor about your answers. Let your doctor know how you feel. Only your doctor can help with some causes of anxiety problems.
Where can I get more information?

Websites

- American Cancer Society → search Anxiety and fear
- Cancer Care Nova Scotia → search Anxiety
- Wellspring → search Cancer and anxiety
- Princess Margaret Cancer Centre → search Psychosocial distress – general
- Oncolink → search Adjustment to cancer – anxiety and distress
- Mayo Clinic → search Anxiety
- Canadian Mental Health Association → search Anxiety Disorders

Remember:

✓ Get exercise
✓ Eat well
✓ Avoid alcohol and other sedatives
✓ Use relaxation techniques
✓ Make sleep a priority
✓ Quit smoking and avoid drinking coffee
✓ Let it out
✓ Use spirituality
✓ Get support
✓ Get professional support