



# Managing anxiety after cancer treatment

UHN

## Information for cancer survivors who have finished treatment

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 unease. It is a normal response to threat or stress. Anxiety and fear are common feelings for patients and families coping with cancer.

You may have anxiety because you were diagnosed with cancer or you are going to do 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

Feeling anxious is normal.

You may also worry about your family and relationships:

- changes in relationships with loved ones
- being able to continue family duties
- being a burden to others
- loss of independence

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 thinking or solving problems
- being nervous or restless
- feeling or looking tense
- worries about "losing control"
- an uneasy sense that something bad is going to happen
- trembling and shaking
- headaches
- being cranky or angry with others
- feeling tired or fatigue
- trouble sleeping or restless sleep

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.

Life experiences such as traumatic events seem to trigger anxiety. This is especially true for people who are more likely to be anxious.

## **How long will it last?**

Your worries may not go away on their own. They may get worse over time if you do not get help. See your doctor or a mental health provider before your anxiety 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. Get exercise**

Exercise is a great way to reduce stress. It can improve your mood and keep you healthy. It works best if you set up a regular routine and exercise most days of the week (5 or 6 days). 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.

### **2. Eat well**

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.

Include foods in your diet 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.

### **3. Avoid alcohol and other sedatives**

These can make anxiety worse.

### **4. Use relaxation techniques**

Yoga, visualization and meditation are some examples. These relaxation techniques can help reduce anxiety.

### **5. Make sleep a priority**

Make sure you are getting enough sleep and that you are sleeping well. If you have trouble sleeping, see your doctor.

### **6. Quit smoking and cut back or quit drinking coffee**

Both nicotine and caffeine can worsen anxiety.

### **7. Let feelings out**

Talk about your feelings and fears and those of your family members. It is okay to feel sad and frustrated.

### **8. Use spirituality**

Use prayer, meditation, or other types of spiritual support.

### **9. Get support**

Decide together with your family or caregiver what things you can do to support each other.

### **10. Get professional help**

Get help through counseling and support groups.

## **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?

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2. How bad is my anxiety?

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

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**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?

1. American Cancer society  
[www.cancer.org/](http://www.cancer.org/) → Anxiety and fear
2. Cancer Care Nova Scotia  
[www.cancercare.ns.ca/](http://www.cancercare.ns.ca/) → Anxiety
3. Wellspring  
[www.wellspring.ca/](http://www.wellspring.ca/) → Cancer and anxiety
4. Princess Margaret Hospital  
[www.theprincessmargaret.ca/](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca/) → Psychosocial distress- general
5. Oncolink  
[www.oncolink.org/](http://www.oncolink.org/) → Adjustment to cancer - anxiety and distress
6. Mayo clinic  
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/> → Anxiety
7. Canadian Mental Health Association  
<http://www.cmha.ca/> → 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