
Adjusting to Life with Cancer

A diagnosis of cancer impacts many parts of your life – whether you have just found out you have cancer, are getting treated, or have finished treatment. You likely feel both physical and emotional changes which can impact the way you feel and how you live.

These changes may affect daily life, but there are ways to cope.

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Dealing with a cancer diagnosis

When you learn you have cancer, you may feel like your life has been turned upside down. It can seem overwhelming at first, but knowing what to expect may help you feel more at ease.

Once the shock of learning you have cancer wears off, the process of making changes begins. You may have to rearrange things in your life as you start treatment. You may have to learn new ways of [talking to your loved ones](#)¹ and to your [health care team](#)². And you probably have a lot of questions to ask about dealing with all the new issues that cancer brings. The following tips can help.

Get in touch with your feelings

Just as cancer affects your physical health, it can bring up a wide range of feelings you're not used to. Having cancer can also make many feelings seem more intense. These feelings may change daily, hourly, or even minute to minute. This is true whether you're currently in treatment, done with treatment, or the friend or family member of

someone with cancer. **These feelings are all normal.**

Learn how to recognize the wide range of emotions you could be experiencing, including:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Denial
- Anger
- Fear and worry
- Hope
- Sadness and depression
- Stress and anxiety

"Why me?"

For some people, looking for an answer to “Why me?” can cause sleepless nights and soul searching. Others find that it doesn’t really matter why something has happened – how best to deal with it is more important. Worry can drain people of energy that is needed to help cope with the illness. If you find yourself unable to move beyond this question, talk with your cancer care team.

Tell your friends and family and let them help

Talking about your cancer can help you deal with all of the new emotions you are feeling. Consider letting your family and friends know about your diagnosis. It may affect them as much as you. The people in your life may also feel worried, angry, or afraid.

Once people learn of your cancer, some will ask you how they can help. Others will wonder what they can do for you but won't be sure how to ask you. You can help your friends cope with the news by letting them help you in some way. For example, ask them to drive your carpool or go to the store. Make a list of things you think you might need help with, so they can pick something they're able to do for you.

Know when to seek professional help

If you have feelings that overwhelm or concern you, or that go on for more than 2 weeks, talk to your health care team. Some of these symptoms may include:

- Feelings of sadness that don't go away

- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, as if life has no meaning
- A short temper, or feeling moody
- A hard time thinking or concentrating
- No interest in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Sleep problems
- A racing heart
- Fatigue that doesn't go away

Call your health care team right away if you have thoughts about hurting or killing yourself.

Tips for coping

There are many ways to deal with your emotions. Follow these tips to help you cope:

- Talk about your feelings, no matter what they are.
- Stay active and eat balanced meals.
- Treat yourself to things you enjoy, like a hot bath, a nap, or your favorite foods.
- Go to a movie, out to dinner, or to a game.
- Get help with everyday jobs like cooking and cleaning.
- Don't try to do it all yourself.
- Don't try to force yourself to be happy.
- Don't try to do too much in one day.
- Don't give up healthy habits.

Learn more coping skills in our [checklist for patients](#)³.

Adjusting to a “new normal”

Those who have gone through cancer treatment describe the first few months as a time of change. It's not so much “getting back to normal” as it is finding out what's normal for you now. People often say that life has new meaning or that they look at things differently. Your new normal may include:

- Changes in the way you eat and the things you do
- New or different sources of financial, social, or emotional support
- Needing help doing things you used to do without problems
- Permanent scars on your body

- Emotional scars from going through so much

You may see yourself in a different way or find that others think of you differently now. Whatever your new normal may be, give yourself time to adapt to the changes. Take it one day at a time.

Dealing with the fear of recurrence

When your treatment is finished, you'll probably be happy to be done so you can get back to how things used to be. At the same time, you may feel sad and worried. It's very common to think about whether the cancer will come back and what happens now.

Fear about cancer coming back is the most common emotional challenge people face after cancer.

[Cancer recurrence](#)⁴ is defined as when cancer comes back after you finish treatment and cancer has not been found in your body for a while. Usually doctors call it a recurrence if there have been no signs of cancer for a year or more. The cancer may come back in the same place it first started, or it may appear somewhere else in the body.

You may have questions about the possibility of recurrence, such as:

- Will there ever be a time when I'll be sure my cancer won't come back?
- What should I look for if I am worried about a recurrence?
- What symptoms should I report to my health care team that might mean the cancer is back?
- What can I do to lower the chance my cancer will come back?
- What other health problems am I at risk for after my cancer treatment?

It's normal to worry about the cancer coming back, especially during the first year after treatment. Survivors may become concerned that any new symptom could mean that the cancer has come back. It may help to keep a diary of symptoms to discuss at your next follow-up visit. And ask what the next steps are in your cancer follow-up care.

And know that although many people say their fear of cancer returning fades over time, things like follow-up visits, anniversary events, or the illness of a family member can make you worry about your health. This is normal and a good time to seek support.

[For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey](#)

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/telling-others-about-your-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/the-doctor-patient-relationship.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/coping-checklist-for-patients.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html

References

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National Cancer Institute. Taking time: Support for people. Cancer.gov. Updated January 2019. Accessed November 23, 2020.

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