



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for

Gynaecological Cancers

# NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

## End of life issues

### Unfinished business

This might be a good time to think about the relationships or friendships that are important to you. You might not have been in contact with some of your friends for a while, or you might have had a 'falling out' with someone that you now want to repair. You might want to spend more time with particular people, or you might want to say something to someone that you feel you have always wanted to say. This can be a time of healing and strengthening the relationships and friendships that are important to you.

However, it is unrealistic to think that all the conflicts in your past or present relationships and friendships will be able to be resolved. It is a matter of prioritising those in your life who are important to you, those with whom you want to try to resolve any issues, and those with whom you want to spend time.

You might find yourself thinking about the past. You might want to visit the place where you were born, or go through your old photographs. This might be a good way to come to terms with the events in your life.

You might also want to write letters to people you are close to, or prepare a tape to be given to them after your death, or to be given to children or grandchildren at major events in their lives.

Whatever you do is a very personal experience, and you need to do what is right for you, at the time that feels right.

### Spiritual or religious comfort

Religious beliefs and the question of meaning can become increasingly important to women with cancer. You might find that your diagnosis has deepened your faith, or has made you question it. You might feel confused about what you believe and why this is happening to you. It might be useful to talk to a priest or religious representative about questions you have, even if you have not attended any services for a while.

### What if I decide not to have any more treatment?

It is difficult to decide when to stop cancer treatment. You need to get as much information as you can from your treatment team and weigh up the possible benefits and the side effects of each treatment. It is important to think about your quality of life.

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Talk about your decision with your doctor or other members of your treatment or palliative care team, your family, partner and friends or a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist.

Ultimately, the decision to stop cancer treatment is your decision. You might feel that although you want to stop treatment, your family or your partner does not want you to. If this happens, you and your doctor or a counsellor or psychologist might need to talk to your family or your partner about their concerns.

### **Fears about dying**

Many people fear dying. This is natural, particularly in the Western world where we do not have much contact with people who are dying. Dying can be a very peaceful process, and health professionals working with people who are dying report that there is often a sense of calm surrounding the person who is dying.

The process of dying for women with gynaecological cancer usually occurs over a period of time and as the body gets weaker over time, this can help women to let go.

Health professionals working with people who are dying say that most people know when they are dying. You can be reassured that when you are dying everything will be done to keep you as pain free and comfortable as possible, and that you can have family and friends with you.

Coming to terms with dying is an ongoing process. It can be helpful to express your fears and concerns about dying to your doctor, family and friends. This can also help them to express their fears and grief about you dying, and bring you closer together.

### **Practical aspects of preparing for death**

It is important to think about the practical aspects of preparing for death, although it can be difficult to do so. This can ensure that your wishes are acted upon. It can also prevent any painful decisions that your partner or family might need to make if you do not express your wishes.

Legal considerations differ in each state and territory. However, some things to consider include:

#### *Living will or an Advanced Health Directive*

You may wish to discuss with your partner, family and/or a close friend and your doctor whether or not you wish to be kept alive by artificial means, or resuscitated if you stop breathing.

You might also write an Advanced Health Directive stating your wishes. An Advanced Health Directive is a document that states your wishes or directions regarding your future health care. It can be used to cover matters such as consent to future health treatment and the circumstances in which you want, or do not want, to have life-sustaining measures. The Advanced Health Directive only comes into effect when you are no longer capable of making decisions for yourself.

The requirements for an Advanced Health Directive may differ depending on the state or territory where you live. You should talk to your doctor about what you want and how to write an Advanced Health Directive. You should discuss the nature of life-saving treatments and their end results with your doctor, so that you are fully informed before you make any decisions.

Decisions in your Advanced Health Directive should be about specific situations rather than a general, 'do not resuscitate' statement.

Your solicitor can prepare the document for you, or you could purchase a standard form from your newsagent. In some states you need to sign the document in the presence of your doctor or have the doctor provide a certificate to say that you had the necessary decision-making capacity at the time you made the directive.

To ensure that your wishes are carried out, a copy of your Advanced Health Directive should be held in your medical file and given to your treatment team. Your file should also be marked to indicate that it contains your Advanced Health Directive. You should plan to review your decision at regular intervals, but particularly if your health changes significantly.

An Advanced Health Directive does not replace a protected or enduring Power of Attorney, which enables the holder to manage your personal or business affairs when you can no longer do so.

### *Power of Attorney*

A Power of Attorney is a document given from one person to another to act on their behalf should they not be able to manage their own affairs.

Your partner can have your Power of Attorney or you can choose another adult, such as a close and trusted friend. The nominated person, known legally as the donee, can also manage your financial or practical arrangements, if you are not able to do this for yourself.

An ordinary Power of Attorney applies only while the donor is capable of making her own decisions. If, for any reason, she loses her own decision-making power, the ordinary Power of Attorney is no longer valid. An Enduring Power of Attorney enables the donor to give another person the legal authority to manage her affairs on her behalf immediately, or in the future, if she loses the capacity to make her own decisions.

You should talk to a solicitor about how to nominate a Power of Attorney.

### *Writing a will*

A will outlines who should receive your possessions and property after your death. If you do not write a will, a government body will decide this for you. This might not be in accord with your wishes and can also be very costly. A will can also contain instructions for funeral and burial arrangements.

You might also need to discuss with your partner, family and/or close friends:

- how any children you have under 18 years will be cared for
- your wishes about your funeral and burial arrangements
- your preference about dying at home or in a hospice, palliative care unit or hospital.

Talk to a solicitor about drawing up a will or making changes to any existing will. It is better to do this when you are feeling well.

Your thoughts may change over time, so it is good to keep others informed of any changes. You should tell your partner, family and/or a close friend about where you keep legal documents and how to contact your solicitor.

### **Further support or information**

The Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20) is a confidential service where you can talk about your concerns and needs with specialist cancer nurses. You can also ask for a free copy of the *Living with Advanced Cancer* booklet.

Palliative Care Australia is the national organisation for palliative care. Telephone the national office in the ACT on 02 6232 4433, or visit their website at [www.palliativecare.org.au](http://www.palliativecare.org.au)

### **Sources**

We thank the National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre ([www.nbocc.org.au](http://www.nbocc.org.au)) for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet.

## **NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS**

### **CANCER AUSTRALIA**

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**The National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers is an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for women affected by gynaecological cancers, their families and carers, and to lessen the impact of cancer on their lives. It has been established by Cancer Australia.**

#### **End of life issues 2010**

Last updated 2009. The information in this fact sheet was current at the time of publication. To check if it is the most up-to date version, please call 02 6217 9818

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