



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for

Gynaecological Cancers

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

Survivorship and ongoing support

This information is about the feelings and challenges that you may face when your treatment is over. If you are still having treatment or your doctor has told you that your cancer has advanced (cannot be cured), then this information may not be very helpful. The Cancer Council Victoria booklet, *When Cancer Won't Go Away*, is a guide for people with advanced cancer. For a free copy call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

What does being a 'cancer survivor' mean?

The term 'cancer survivor' means different things to different people. Here we use the term 'cancer survivor' to mean anyone who has finished their 'active' cancer treatment.

Common feelings and questions

Most people go through a mixture of good and bad feelings after their treatment is over. You may feel relief and happiness that you made it this far and your treatment seems to have been successful.

But it isn't unusual to feel frightened and lost, especially during the first few months. Immediately after your treatment, it is very natural to have concerns about your future and how you will cope. Like many cancer survivors, you may feel:

- Isolated, alone and abandoned: where have all the nurses and doctors gone? Who can you talk to now and who will answer all your questions?

- Unsure about relationships with your family and friends: they don't fully understand and they are expecting too much from you.
- Uncertain, not daring to believe that your treatment really has worked: is the cancer really gone? How can you be sure? Will the cancer come back?
- In limbo: unsure how to start your life again or even if it is what you want right now. Nothing feels secure or stable.

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- Anxious and frightened about how you will be followed up: what tests will you need, how often will you have a check-up?
- Worried about possible long-term side effects and how these may affect your work, social life, relationships and hobbies.
- Lacking in confidence: how will you cope with the changes in your body image and sexuality that your cancer and its treatment may have caused?
- Angry and frustrated because you don't feel that you can plan ahead any more: what if your cancer comes back before that holiday comes around or your child gets married?
- Different about your body and health: many people say their self-confidence gets shaken up a lot. They also don't trust their body as much as they used to now that it 'has let them down'.

Not everyone will have difficulties after their treatment finishes. But for many people their problems and fears won't just go away.

Be kind to yourself during this time. Don't expect to feel great about everything. Go slowly and give yourself the space to come to terms with all you have been through and what lies ahead.

It can be very exhausting to try to stay positive all the time and act as if you are fine. You may have days when you feel awful: very down, sad and alone. Other days you may just feel angry, fearful or frustrated. This is OK. It can be difficult but try to listen to your feelings and accept them as they happen. It is better not to ignore negative thoughts but try to work through them.

Most cancer survivors say that they do feel better with time. But it usually doesn't happen overnight – so don't expect too much from yourself too soon. Also, don't be surprised if, some time after your treatment (sometimes a few years), you have periods of feeling down. This is not uncommon either.

If you continue to feel very low for long periods of time, see your doctor. You may be suffering from depression. This is different from the sadness and low moods that many cancer

survivors have soon after their treatment. There is more about depression under Feeling low or depressed, later in this factsheet.

Try not to see it as a weakness if you are having trouble coping on your own. Lean on those close to you. Don't be afraid to ask for help. See this as a positive move towards your recovery. Support from others will not only give you comfort but also practical ideas on how to cope.

Consider joining a support group, if you haven't already. For more information about support groups, see our factsheet on [Coping with your diagnosis](#).

A trained counsellor may help. The Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20) can put you in touch with support services in your area.

As well as talking to others about how you feel, there are other things that you can do. For example, try:

- being active and getting daily exercise to help improve your mood
- eating well and staying healthy
- avoiding alcohol and recreational drugs: they may make you feel better for a short time but generally the after effects just make you feel worse
- practising some form of relaxation, such as meditation, visualisation, yoga, massage and deep breathing
- reading about your feelings: this helps some people understand their feelings better and not feel so alone
- writing about your feelings in a journal.

Reactions and needs of those close to you

After your cancer treatment is over, the people around you are also likely to go through some strong emotions. Like you, their priorities may change: they may want to focus more on enjoying the important things in life, such as their family and friends.

This can be very positive. Your relationships may be stronger and more loving because of it. But you may also find that some of their reactions upset and frustrate you.

Many survivors say that those very close to them don't really understand how much help they still need. They might expect you to be back to 'normal' much faster than you feel you can be. It can be very difficult to let them know this. It isn't uncommon to feel guilty about all you have already put them through.

But don't let this override your true needs right now. Your recovery may take a lot longer than your actual treatment did. This may come as a shock to both you and your family. For life to move forward it is very important that everyone finds a way to cope with this.

As you build your 'new' life with those close to you, things are likely to become easier. This can take time and patience but many survivors say their new life has more meaning and is often more fulfilling.

Let your family and friends know that you understand it is hard for them as well. Tell them how much you appreciate all they have already done to help you. But you still need their support.

You might need to point out that you still feel very tired, vulnerable or scared. You can't just 'get on with it' and move on as quickly as they might want you to. If you can work together and share your worries then it will be easier for everyone.

Coping with your children's needs

If you have children, you may not want to let them know that you still don't feel great, even though your treatment is over. Depending on their age there will be different needs and issues to deal with. But whatever their age, be as open and as honest as possible. This will make them feel safe. Most kids will understand that you still need some time to get over your treatment.

Where possible try to involve them in your recovery. With younger children, if you are feeling too tired to play with them, suggest that they lie next to you and read a book while you take a nap. Or curl up together and chat about things that you like to do together. This isn't so easy with the under-fours, but maybe a friend or relative could come over and help you play with them. Two pairs of hands can make it less tiring!

With older children you may be able to ask them to help you cook, clean and shop, or read to you while you lie down.

Involving your children, where you can, not only makes them feel that you want and need them near you, but also allows them to spend more time with you.

Kids can be the 'best medicine' in many situations. They can make you laugh and give you reasons to want to cope.

Follow-up care

When your treatment finished, your doctor probably told you that you would need regular check-ups. They may continue for several years.

You may have mixed feelings about this. Follow-up appointments may make you feel very anxious, especially in the couple of weeks before they are due. You may keep having thoughts about your cancer coming back, or that your doctor will find a different (new) cancer. There is more information about Fear of your cancer coming back later in this factsheet.

It is important that you get the follow-up care that you need. Immediately after treatment finishes, many cancer survivors feel very isolated or abandoned. You may not know what is going on or even who to contact if you need help.

At your first appointment, ask your doctor what to expect from your follow-up care. If you don't already know, then ask them who you should contact if you are worried. Get phone numbers and times when it is best to contact them.

Some research suggests that there is a difference between what cancer survivors and doctors expect from follow-up appointments. Your doctor may ask you about things that are not worrying you at all, but not ask you about things that you have concerns about.

Feel free to talk with your doctor about your concerns even if they don't ask you. It is important to feel that you are getting the follow-up care that suits your individual needs.

Why do I need to have regular check-ups?

Everyone is different and follow-up care will vary depending on:

- the particular type of cancer you had
- the type of treatment you had
- any long-term side effects.

Regular check-ups allow your doctor to keep an eye on your health and well-being. They will also be looking for any signs that your cancer may be coming back.

Your doctor will use the checkups to:

- see how you are recovering
- check how you are feeling and coping with rebuilding your life
- ask if you have any concerns
- keep an eye on any long-term side effects and help to treat or control them
- investigate any new symptoms.

Symptoms can be caused by other medical conditions, a lot of them much less serious than cancer. So try not to worry too much that every symptom you have means your cancer is coming back.

This isn't always easy to do but in time most people do become less worried. Always check with your doctor if your symptoms persist.

What happens during check-ups?

Your doctor will examine you and ask you how you have been feeling. Don't be afraid to tell them the truth. For example, if you feel very low in mood, let them know. Tell them about any symptoms that are bothering you.

You may need to have a blood test. Occasionally your doctor may order an X-ray or scan.

How often should I have check-ups?

As a general rule, most women will see their doctor regularly for five years after treatment for gynaecological cancer.

Check-ups will usually be more frequent during the first two to three years. As time goes on, and assuming that you stay well, check-ups will gradually become less frequent.

If you are not sure about your schedule for check-ups, ask your doctor.

Remember: if you are worried or notice any new symptoms between appointments, let your doctor know. Don't wait until your next appointment.

Who will manage my long-term side effects?

If you have side effects that will need ongoing treatment or care, you need to discuss this with your doctor. Ask whether you should see your specialist or your GP.

You may need help from another health professional such as a physiotherapist, dietitian or specialist nurse. If this is the case, your specialist may suggest that your GP coordinate your care, but they will also be available if necessary.

Some people develop treatment-related problems a few years down the track. For example, if you have early menopause because of your treatment, you could be at risk of osteoporosis, a condition that thins your bones.

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy sometimes cause longer-term side effects. If you have any concerns, ask your doctor for advice.

The first check-up

At your first follow-up appointment you are likely to feel quite nervous. It is a good idea to bring along someone close to you, to help you remember what your doctor says and to prompt you with the questions that you want to ask. Write your questions down before you come. This way you won't forget or feel lost for words.

Tell your doctor exactly how you feel. If you are feeling very tired or down, let them know. You don't have to try and be brave. It is important that they are aware of these things so that they can best plan your care.

You may find it helpful to ask your doctor some of the following questions.

- What can I do to reduce the chance of my cancer coming back?
- Why do I need check-ups?
- What happens during check-ups?

- How often will I need to come for check-ups?
- Are check-ups effective: do they always show up problems if there are any?
- What symptoms should I be looking out for?
- What tests will I have if a follow-up appointment shows signs that the cancer may have come back?
- What should I do if I have any new symptoms between appointments?

If you see doctors other than your cancer specialist it is very important that you tell them about your cancer and its treatment. It may affect their decisions about the health problems you are seeing them about.

You need to also tell other health care professionals such as dentists and dieticians and complementary therapists such as massage therapists and hypnotherapists.

Coping with anxiety before your check-ups

Many cancer survivors say that they begin to feel very anxious before their routine check-ups. Sleeping problems, having bad dreams and feeling more general aches and pains than usual are not uncommon in the lead-up to the appointment. Some people say they suffer from mood swings and poor appetite.

There are many reasons why you may feel anxious before each check-up. The main one for most people is the fear that they will be told their cancer has come back. You may also feel anxious because going back to the hospital brings back memories of your treatment, tests and side effects.

Just when your life is getting back to normal and you feel in control again, a check-up can make you feel very vulnerable and fearful. It forces you to think about the possibility of your cancer coming back and your life being turned upside down again.

Finding ways to try and cope with your worries before each checkup is important. Once you have had a few and all is OK, you may be able to approach them with less concern. The following tips may also help:

Take a close friend or relative with you to your check-up: don't try and deal with it all alone. You will be surprised how much it helps to share your fears! And people close to you want to feel they are helping.

Make the day something to look forward to! Plan to do something special after your appointment – go out for a nice meal, buy yourself a treat – add a positive touch to the day.

As hard as it may be, try to see your check-ups as positive. Regular check-ups increase your chance of any problems being picked up early, when they are easier to treat.

Fear of your cancer coming back

Feeling anxious and frightened about the cancer coming back is a very common fear for cancer survivors, especially in the first year after treatment.

For some people the fear is so strong that day-to-day life is a big struggle. They don't find any joy in life or believe that they ever will again. Living with this fear has been described as a 'shadow': no matter which way you turn, it is always there.

Many survivors say that with time their fears lessen. But they also say that no matter how much time passes, it is hard not to be reminded at certain times such as:

- special occasions: birthdays, Christmas and anniversaries
- the date you were first diagnosed and when your treatment finished
- just before and during follow-up appointments
- if you hear about anyone else getting cancer
- having symptoms that are similar to those you had when you were first diagnosed with cancer
- if someone you know dies from cancer or any other type of illness
- passing by the hospital where you had your treatment or having to visit someone you know in the same hospital
- reading or hearing in the media about cancer, new treatments and celebrities with cancer.

What symptoms should I watch out for?

Your cancer doctor is the best person to speak with about what symptoms you should look out for and report. They will also be able to give you some idea about the risk of your cancer coming back. But this is only if you want to know. Not everyone is ready to hear these answers as soon as their treatment finishes.

At first you may think that every ache, pain, runny nose or feeling of sickness means that your cancer has come back. You may worry so much that you find yourself at your GP's office more than usual. Most survivors say that over time, their confidence builds up and they don't think about their cancer coming back as much.

If you do have a symptom, try not to worry too much. If the symptom doesn't go away within a week, make an appointment to see your GP or specialist. They will be able to reassure you and decide whether or not you need to have any further tests.

Remember: a lot of symptoms won't have anything to do with your cancer. You may just have a headache, stomach upset or feel generally tired and run down from the past few months of your treatment.

How likely is it that my cancer will come back?

You may also wonder how likely it is that your cancer will come back, or how long most people who have had your type of cancer live for.

Your cancer doctor is the best person to talk with about your case. But they still won't be able to tell you for sure what will happen.

Your doctor will be able to give you some answers based on research studies and from their experience with other patients, but there is always going to be some uncertainty.

Survival statistics

You may hear your doctor talk about 'five-year' or '10-year' survival for your type of cancer. These statistics cause a lot of confusion and concern for many people.

'Five-year survival' and '10-year survival' refers to the percentage of people who are living five or 10 years after their diagnosis with a certain type of cancer. This doesn't mean that all these people are cured. But it does not mean that they will only live for five years either!

Some patients may be cured but for others their cancer will come back (recur) in this five-year period. They may have another lot of treatment and continue to live for many more

years. For some patients the cancer will come back after the five years.

Generally, the more time that goes by, the less likely it is that your cancer will recur. For example, you have a much lower chance of your cancer coming back after five years than you do after two years. And the more years that you go on without your cancer coming back, the higher your chance of a complete cure. This is true for most types of cancers.

Why do doctors use five-year and 10-year survival rates?

Depending on the type of cancer, there may be only a small chance that it will come back after five or 10 years. But most doctors are wary of saying that you are 'cured' because they know that there is still that small chance. So instead they use the terms 'five-year survival' and '10-year survival'.

Most of the research studies that follow patients up after their cancer treatment go for five or 10 years, so these are the statistics your doctor will use and quote to you.

How accurate are the statistics?

Five-year and 10-year cancer survival rates are very general. They include everyone with that type of cancer at all stages and grades of the disease. People treated effectively at an early stage can generally count on their survival being better than the average five-year or 10-year rate, while people treated while their cancer is at a later stage may have a slightly poorer outlook.

Remember: no statistics can tell you exactly what will happen to you. You and your cancer are unique.

Statistics take many years to collect and therefore are usually slightly out of date. For example, if you have cancer diagnosed in 2006, the five-year survival rate available may be from 2002. With cancer treatments improving all the time, your outcome is likely to be better than it would have been reported in 2002.

It may be reassuring to know that statistics such as five-year survival rates are likely to change and improve for many types of cancers in the next 20 years.

You should feel free to ask your doctor about the five-year survival rates for your type of cancer. Not everyone wants to know or feels ready to find out immediately after finishing their treatment.

You may want to wait a few months before asking or you may never want to ask. There is no right way to feel about this. What feels right for you is right.

Fear of getting a different cancer

As well as worrying about your cancer coming back, you may also worry about developing a different cancer.

Most people who get cancer only get one primary type. It is very rare to develop another, different cancer. But, like most things in life, it is possible. Your risk may be higher if:

- you were born with genes that increase your tendency to develop cancer – this is rare and affects less than 5 per cent of people
- you have previously been exposed to cancer-causing agents such as smoke and the sun
- your prior cancer treatment has increased your risk. For example, radiotherapy can sometimes increase your risk of getting a different cancer later in life.

If you have concerns about getting a different type of cancer, it can help to talk to your doctor.

Below is a checklist of possible signs of cancer. You should contact your doctor if you have:

- a lump anywhere in your body that won't go away
- changes to a mole on your skin
- a cough or hoarseness that won't go away
- a change in bowel habits: diarrhoea or constipation for more than six weeks
- any abnormal bleeding
- unexplained weight loss.

Remember: this is a guide. If you have concerns about any symptoms, see your doctor.

Staying healthy

Many cancer survivors decide that they want to live a healthier lifestyle than they did before they got cancer. You may begin to look at eating a healthier diet, doing more exercise and trying to lessen the amount of stress in your life.

It is uncertain whether these measures will stop your cancer from coming back but they can certainly make you feel better.

Results from large international research studies are telling us that there are lifestyle changes you can make to help lower your risk of developing health problems, and possibly lower the risk of developing cancer recurrence.

Don't smoke

More than 10,000 Australians are diagnosed with a smoking-related cancer each year. Lung cancer is the most common, but smoking is also closely linked to cancer of the bladder, kidney, mouth, stomach and oesophagus.

Stopping smoking is not easy but if you want to prevent cancer then quitting is a great start. For information and support with trying to stop smoking, call the Quitline on 13 78 48 and ask for a free Quit pack to be mailed to you. Or a trained Quitline adviser can help you with practical and expert advice.

You can also log on to the Quit website, for helpful advice and information on quitting. Go to www.quitnow.info.au

Protect yourself in the sun (be SunSmart)

Most cancers diagnosed in Australia each year are skin cancers. Every year, more than 1200 Australians die from skin cancer. Yet it is almost totally preventable.

Use shade when you can, especially when UV radiation is high: between 10 am and 3 pm. Wear hats that shade your face and neck, loose-fitting protective clothing and sunglasses. Wraparound glasses are best. Keep kids out of the sun and always use sun protection on them.

Check the SunSmart UV Alert reported daily in newspaper weather forecasts across Australia. This tells you when UV radiation is high during the day. For more information about sun protection and the UV alert, visit the SunSmart website: www.sunsmart.com.au

Eat a healthy diet

Researchers are now sure that diet is linked to several types of cancer, including cancers of the breast, bowel, stomach, lung, oesophagus, bladder, prostate and pancreas. It is estimated that we could avoid nearly one-third of all cancers if we all stopped or didn't start smoking, exercised, ate healthily and were 'SunSmart'. This is especially true for cancer of the bowel and stomach.

There isn't one type of food that you should avoid. But eating a wide variety of foods and not too much of anything is the key. Here are a few tips that may help you choose a healthy balanced diet.

- Eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables each day. A serving size is about a handful.
- Don't eat too much red or processed meat: choose fish, poultry or vegetarian options for some meals.
- Drink two or more litres of water each day.
- Eat less fat and more fibre.
- Choose wholegrain cereal products (such as wholemeal bread and brown rice) where possible, instead of processed foods like white bread and white rice.
- If you drink alcohol, women should drink no more than one standard drink and men no more than two standard drinks each day.
- Try and stay at a healthy weight.

The National Health and Medical Research Council dietary guidelines provide detailed recommendations about healthy eating for all Australians. Information can be found at www.nhmrc.gov.au

Cancer Council Victoria's booklet *Nutrition and Exercise* also contains useful information. Telephone 13 11 20 for a copy.

Be active

Research has shown us that physical activity may help to improve quality of life and increase survival for some types of cancer.

Being fit and healthy also helps reduce your risk of other health problems such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Studies have also shown that moderate exercise can help to:

- improve your mood
- make you feel better about yourself (boost self-esteem)
- reduce symptoms of fatigue, sickness and pain.

Don't rush into doing a lot of exercise too soon after you finish your treatment. Your body needs time to recover. Increase your activity over time. And always check with your doctor before you begin any exercise program.

For more information about preventing cancer and reducing your risk contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Long-term side effects

A study published in 2005 reports that 20 out of every 100 cancer survivors (20 per cent) have ongoing problems relating to their cancer and its treatment between one and five years after their diagnosis.

It can take time to get over the effects of your treatment. Some problems will disappear quite quickly. Others can take weeks, months or even years to go.

For some people there may be permanent or 'late' side effects. 'Late' side effects are problems that develop a long time after treatment finishes. If you have concerns about this happening talk to your doctor. They will be able to let you know if you are at risk.

The side effects will vary depending on the type and stage of your cancer as well as the type of treatment you had. Changes may include sexual difficulties, incontinence, pain and fatigue. You may also suffer from emotional changes such as anxiety, depression and loss of confidence.

Everyone is different. Someone who had the same type of cancer and treatment as you may recover faster. You may suffer from side effects that they didn't. But this doesn't mean that your cancer is more serious or more likely to come back than theirs.

The important thing is that you find the right support to help you manage and cope with any side effects that you have.

The most common problems that cancer survivors say they have include:

- often feeling very tired (fatigued)
- pain
- loss of self-esteem and confidence about their body
- changes in the way their bladder and bowel work
- difficulties coping with menopausal symptoms
- problems with eating, drinking and weight
- mouth and teeth problems
- bone loss problems (osteoporosis)
- fertility problems
- swelling in the limbs (lymphoedema)
- changes in their sexuality and sex life.

Any change in how your body looks, feels or functions can be very hard to deal with. Other people may not be able to fully understand how much these changes can affect your day-to-day living, especially if it is a few months or years after your treatment finished. This can be very isolating and make it even harder to cope with your side effects.

For more information, see our factsheets on [Managing symptoms and side effects](#) and [Managing pain](#).

Cancer nurses will be able to provide you with information more specific to your needs.

You may also find it helpful to join a support group. Many cancer survivors say that talking to others who are having similar difficulties after their treatment can help a lot. For more information about support groups, see our factsheet on [Coping with your diagnosis](#).

Feeling low or depressed

It isn't uncommon to feel very low or depressed for some time after your treatment finishes. Or you may feel OK for a while and then start to feel sad or down a few weeks, months or even years later.

Try not to be too surprised if you do feel fed up and unhappy at certain times. With all that you have been through, and now trying to rebuild your life, nobody could blame you for feeling like this.

Knowing why you feel like you do can help you to work your way through your feelings. Some people feel sad or depressed because of the changes that their cancer has caused. Others become very down because they are frightened about the future. Will their cancer come back? Will they be able to work again? How will the family cope if they can't earn any money?

Whatever it is that might be making you feel down it is important that you get the support you need.

Signs of depression

There is a difference between feeling down and sad for a while and feeling very depressed for long periods. Depression is much harder to shake and can go on for a long time if you don't get the right sort of help.

If you have one or more of these signs for a few weeks or more you should see your GP:

- feeling very sad and low most of the time
- not being able to enjoy life as you usually do
- having negative thoughts about yourself a lot of the time
- changes in your eating habits: eating much more or less than usual
- weight gain or loss
- feeling very tired a lot of the time
- loss of concentration
- loss of interest in sex
- changes in your sleep habits: not being able to get to sleep, waking in the early hours of the morning or sleeping more than usual
- feeling very anxious and upset often
- feeling that you want to die or would like to kill yourself.

These are not the only signs of depression. Some can be caused by other medical conditions. But if you have some of these signs or think that you may be depressed, it is important that you get some help.

It often helps to let someone close to you know how you are feeling. Also, it is important to let your GP know. Be honest with them about how bad you do feel. This will help your doctor and you make the right decisions about the type of support and care you need.

About using complementary therapies

Some cancer survivors say that using complementary therapies after their cancer treatment helps them to:

- cope with some side effects such as pain and fatigue
- relieve the stress of rebuilding their life
- relax and feel good again
- feel more in control of their situation.

Complementary therapies are used with, not instead of, medical treatments.

Although there is no research to prove that these therapies can stop your cancer coming back or prevent a new cancer, many people say that they find comfort in using them. The touch, talk and time they are given from their therapist can be very reassuring.

Examples of therapies include yoga, gentle massage, reflexology, acupuncture, meditation, hypnotherapy and counselling. Others find that music or art therapy is very useful in helping them to express their feelings and remain positive about their future.

Most complementary therapies are safe to use and if they help, most doctors will be happy for you to use them. But it is important to talk to your doctor about using any type of therapy before trying. A good complementary therapist would always encourage you to discuss any therapies with your cancer doctor or GP.

The Cancer Council NSW booklet, *Understanding Complementary Therapies*, has more information about complementary therapies. It is available free by calling the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20, or online at www.cancercouncil.com.au

Insurance, superannuation and loans

Many cancer survivors say that after they finish treatment they feel they want to get their 'money matters' in order. This could mean talking with a superannuation fund, wanting to get life insurance or managing your income to provide for yourself or your family.

You may worry that because you have had cancer you may no longer be eligible for certain financial services, for example, getting a credit card, mortgage or personal loan. Generally, you don't have to give your medical history to get any of these.

Getting new insurance (life, income cover or travel) may be more difficult because you have had cancer. You will need to provide your medical history for many insurance policies. Generally a mortgage is associated with some kind of insurance so you are likely to have to let them know that you have had cancer.

Many people do not know that they can claim disability benefits from their superannuation or insurance. If your working life is cut short, you probably won't have enough superannuation. Extra disability benefits will help you. This is because your superannuation is designed to last for an 'average' period of retirement, not longer.

You may wish to ask lawyers who have expertise in superannuation and insurance for advice or see a financial counsellor. For general advice, go to the Australian Government's Understanding Money website: www.understandingmoney.gov.au

Working after your treatment is over

Some people may not have stopped working during their treatment. But if your cancer and its treatment have made it impossible for you to go back to your previous type of work, this can be very hard to accept. Some people may be able to re-train and take on a different occupation. This is a big commitment and may take a lot of courage and patience. Others may be physically able to return to their old job but not feel emotionally up to going back straight away.

Some cancer survivors want to take some time out from work after treatment and rethink what they would like to do with their life. Others are very keen to get back to work as soon as possible. For many, working may represent 'normality' and is a sign that they are over their cancer. Some people have no choice but to return to work because of income and family needs.

If you had to leave your old job before or during treatment, you may find it hard to get another job now treatment is over. Most employers are very supportive of employing someone who has had cancer. But there are situations where this is not true and it can come as quite a shock. Everyone is different and reactions will vary. The most important thing is that you feel supported and informed about your choices.

Some people are forced to leave their jobs because of a cancer diagnosis or treatment. If you believe you have been unlawfully discriminated against because of a diagnosis of cancer, you should seek legal advice immediately.

If you need advice about discrimination in the workplace talk to a social worker, a solicitor, the Australian Human Rights Commission (general enquiries 1300 369 711), Centrelink, or a local community health or welfare centre.

The Cancer Council Helpline also has information on legal rights and responsibilities for people with cancer. Telephone 13 11 20.

Possible challenges you may face if you do go back to work

If you return to your job, or start a new one, and people are aware that you have had cancer treatment, you may face some challenges.

Some colleagues may treat you differently. They may not know how to react and be frightened of hurting your feelings so they will avoid saying anything at all. They may act like nothing has happened to you and take the attitude that you must be OK because you look well and seem to be able to do your job again. Others may ask you questions that you are not ready to answer.

You may feel angry, hurt and frustrated by people's reactions. Often, the more relaxed and open you are about your cancer and its treatment, the more likely it will be that your co-workers respond to you in a way that feels right for you. If you are having a lot of trouble settling back into your work life it may help to talk with a counsellor. Some workplaces will have someone on site that you can talk to. If not, call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

What if I can no longer work?

If you can no longer work, this can be very stressful. You will most likely still need a regular income to pay for bills, the mortgage or rent, and other living expenses.

It's important that you get the support and advice that you need.

For information on Commonwealth Government disability, sickness and carer's payments, call Centrelink on 13 27 17.

Some people find it useful to see a financial adviser to discuss their financial concerns. (You may also hear them called a financial planner or consultant.) Your bank may have a financial adviser you can talk to. Or look for an independent financial adviser in the telephone book or on the Internet.

Support with childcare and home duties

You may be eligible for help with childcare costs: call the Family Assistance Office on 13 61 50.

Local councils provide a range of community and in-home services, including foster care for children, meals on wheels, housekeepers and respite care. Telephone your council (listed by council in the White Pages).

For more information, see our factsheet on **Practical and financial support**, or contact your local hospital, community health centre or the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

More information

The Cancer Council Victoria booklet, *[Life After Cancer: A guide for cancer survivors](#)* is available by calling the Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20), or online at www.cancervic.org.au

The Gynaecological Cancer Support website has more information about Life after treatment. Go to www.gynaecancersupport.org.au

The US National Cancer Institute booklet, *[Facing Forward: Life after cancer treatment](#)* has more ideas about ways to manage physical changes, body changes and relationships. Visit www.cancer.gov

See our [Other resources](#) factsheet for more websites and contact details for advocacy and support groups.

Sources

We thank the Cancer Council Victoria (www.cancervic.org.au) for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet.

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

CANCER AUSTRALIA

ABN 21075951918

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.

Survivorship and ongoing support 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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