



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for

Gynaecological Cancers

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

Coping with your diagnosis

Looking after yourself

When you find out you have cancer and while you are undergoing treatment, your body is put through a great deal of physical and emotional strain.

No two people with cancer are alike; everyone copes in their own way. For many people the first few weeks after the diagnosis are very stressful. You may have trouble thinking, eating or sleeping. For most people tearfulness, and feelings of anger and guilt, last from a few days to several weeks.

Common feelings include:

- fear
- anger
- guilt
- denial
- sadness or depression
- loneliness
- loss of control.

You may also feel fatigue, which can make it harder to cope with your feelings.

It is crucial that you take steps to enhance your wellbeing at this time to help you adapt to the stress that you are facing. Nurturing your body and mind by eating nourishing food, doing some enjoyable physical activity, and taking some time out to relax can help you to feel more balanced and improve your vitality.

Eating well

Eating nutritious food will help you keep as well as possible and cope with the cancer and treatment side effects. Depending on your treatment, you may have special dietary needs. A dietitian can help to plan the best foods for your situation – ones that you find tempting, easy to eat and nutritious.

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Talk to your doctor, nurse or dietitian before taking any vitamin or mineral supplements. Too much of some vitamins or minerals can be dangerous. Large doses of some vitamins may even stop your cancer treatment from working the way it should.

The Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20) can send you information on nutrition during and after cancer treatment. Call the Helpline for free copies of these booklets, which are also available at www.cancerCouncil.com.au:

- [*Food and Cancer*](#) (includes recipes)
- [*After Your Cancer Treatment: A guide for eating well and being active*](#).

Being active

You will probably find it helpful to stay active and to exercise regularly if you can. Physical activity – even if gentle or for a short duration – helps to improve circulation, reduce tiredness, decrease joint or muscle pain, and elevate mood. The amount and type of exercise you do will depend on what you are used to, how well you feel and what your doctor advises.

Start by making small changes to your daily activities, such as walking to the shops. Even gardening can be beneficial. If you want to do more vigorous exercise, ask your doctor what is best for you.

Relaxation techniques

Some people find relaxation or meditation helps them feel better by releasing tension and anxiety. Often, relaxation exercises can also help reduce pain and increase energy levels. The hospital social worker or nurse will know whether the hospital or a community health centre runs any programs.

You may also enjoy exploring relaxation techniques in the comfort of your own home using audiovisual material such as CDs or DVDs. Contact your local library or the Library of the Cancer Council in your state to access these resources.

To contact your state Cancer Council library, or for a copy of the Cancer Council booklet [*Overcoming Cancer Pain*](#), call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

See also our factsheet on [Managing pain](#).

Finding hope

Having cancer doesn't mean you have to lose hope. The outlook for many cancers is improving constantly. Some cancers can be cured, while others can be controlled. If the cancer can't be controlled, symptoms can be relieved to make life more comfortable.

Often the first thing people ask about having cancer is, 'Am I going to die?' Talk to your doctor about what the diagnosis means for you and what the future may hold. You may find that knowing more about your illness helps ease the fear. What you hope for may also change as treatment progresses.

Seeking support

Living with a serious disease such as cancer is not easy. You may worry about caring for your family, keeping your job, or continuing daily activities. Concerns about treatment and managing side effects, hospital stays, and extra bills are also common.

It is common to feel depressed. You may not be able to think clearly, lose interest in things or may not want to get up in the morning. For more information, see our factsheet on [Survivorship and ongoing support](#).

Tackling anxiety and depression early may mean that you can deal with problems quickly and avoid symptoms becoming worse. Counselling or medication can help.

It may help to talk about your feelings with others. Your partner, family members and friends are a good source of support or you might prefer to talk to:

- members of your treatment team
- a hospital counsellor, social worker or psychologist
- your religious or spiritual adviser
- a support group
- the Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20).

Support groups

Cancer support groups offer mutual support and information to people with cancer and, often, to their families. It can help to talk with others who have been through the same experience.

Your hospital may run special cancer support groups. Check with your doctor, nurse or social worker. Other support groups are run by women with cancer themselves.

As well as encouragement and emotional support, support groups can offer many practical suggestions and ways to cope. Support groups usually welcome family members and carers, and there are some support groups just for carers.

Going along to a support group for the first time can be a little daunting. Group leaders are aware of this, so you will receive a warm welcome.

If you find that the first group you try isn't really for you, try another group. You're sure to find a different one that's more suitable for you.

In some states, there are telephone-based support groups. There are also discussion groups on the Internet where you can talk to other women with cancer. For more information on support groups in your state, call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Family and friends

Sharing your diagnosis isn't easy. You may feel uncomfortable talking about personal matters. You may be unsure of how you'll react when you tell family and friends or how they'll respond.

If you have children, the prospect of telling them you have cancer can be frightening and unsettling. The Cancer Council booklet, *When a Parent Has Cancer: How to talk to your kids* can help you prepare for this difficult conversation. Call 13 11 20 for a copy.

You may find that your friends and family don't know what to say to you. In time, you may feel able to approach your friends directly and tell them what you need. Some people prefer to ask a family member or a friend to talk with others and coordinate any offers of help.

Some people may feel so uncomfortable that they avoid you. They may expect you to 'lead the way' and tell them what you need. This can be difficult to handle and can make you feel lonely. At a time when you need support, try not to shut others out.

- The Cancer Council's booklet *Emotions and Cancer* may help at this stressful time. You can request a free copy from the Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20), or download it from the website of Cancer Council New South Wales: www.cancercouncil.com.au
- The Gynaecological Cancer Support website has more information on coping with your diagnosis and communicating with family and friends. Go to www.gynaecancersupport.org.au

Learning about cancer

Learning more about cancer and its treatment will help you and your family know what to expect.

Decide how much information you would like about your illness. Some people feel more in control of what is happening to them when they know all the facts. This can help them explain things to their family and friends, and help them during talks with their doctor.

Others feel overwhelmed by too many details and want only an overview. Your need for information may change as treatment progresses.

Genetic counselling services

Cancer is common – many people have someone in their family who has (or had) cancer. Many people worry about what it might mean for their own health if there are people in their family who have developed cancer.

If you have a family history of cancer it can mean:

- cancer has developed by chance in your family (most common)
- you may have an increased risk of getting cancer
- you may have an inherited faulty gene causing an increased chance of cancer. It is important to know this is only a very small percentage of certain cancers (up to 5 per cent).

Talk to your doctor who can help you find out if your family history is of concern. If necessary your doctor may refer you to a family cancer clinic or genetic counselling service. Genetic counselling services provide information, services and support for patients and their families with a family history of cancer.

Caring for someone with cancer

You may be reading this information because you are caring for someone with cancer. Being a carer can be very stressful, especially when the person you are looking after is someone you love. You have to keep up with the demands of family and work. Your focus tends to be on the patient's needs. But it's also up to you to try to stay in tune with yourself.

Remember the things you need to maintain a healthy mind, body, and spirit. And if you can, try to find a quiet time for reflection each day.

Any problems your family may have had before the cancer diagnosis are likely to be more intense now. This is true whether you are caring for a young child, an adult child, a parent, or a spouse. Your caregiver role can often trigger feelings and role changes that affect your family in ways you never expected. And relatives you don't know very well or who live far away may be present more often, too, which may complicate things.

Look after yourself during this time. Give yourself some time out, and share your worries and concerns with somebody neutral such as a counsellor or your doctor.

Many cancer support groups are open to carers as well as people with cancer. A support group can offer the opportunity to share experiences and ways of coping.

There are also support services that can help you, such as Home Help, Meals on Wheels or visiting nurses.

- For more information on support services, see our factsheet on [Practical and financial support](#).
- The Cancer Council booklet *Caring for Someone with Cancer* will support you in your caring role and give you practical tips on how to create a balance between caring, family and work demands, and your own

needs. For a copy, call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 or go to www.cancerCouncil.com.au

- Carers Australia offers help and information for carers. Call 1800 242 636 or visit www.carersaustralia.com.au

Using a professional interpreter

If you are reading this for a family member or friend who does not understand English very well, you can get a professional interpreter to help.

Interpreters are available free of charge in both the public and private hospitals, although they must be booked before any consultation. To book an interpreter:

Ask your doctor about the hospital's interpreter services.

Call the Translating and Interpreting Service on 13 14 50.

Call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20. The Helpline is available in languages other than English in some states.

Sources

We thank the following organisations for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet:

Cancer Council New South Wales
www.cancerCouncil.com.au

National Cancer Institute (USA)
www.cancer.gov

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.

Coping with your diagnosis 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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