



Cancer survivorship information for survivors and carers



Coping with the fear of your cancer coming back

Although treatment is now over you may begin to have fears about the future. You may worry about:

- how likely it is that your cancer will come back
- what symptoms to watch out for
- how your body looks and feels
- what survival statistics mean
- follow-up appointments
- significant events or dates that remind you of your cancer diagnosis

- getting another type of cancer.

For some people these fears (especially of the cancer coming back) are so strong that day-to-day life can become a big struggle. They don't find many pleasures in life or believe they will ever enjoy life.

Some survivors say these fears are overwhelming. They feel:

- caught in a 'no-man's land' or 'in limbo'
- full of confusion and uncertainty
- fearful of planning ahead; as one survivor said 'I feel too scared

to live... too scared to die'

- as if life has 'stalled' or been 'put on hold' with no way of knowing how to 'get started' or 'move forward' again.

Although it can take time, it doesn't need to always feel this frightening. By acknowledging fears and taking control of them most survivors find they can enjoy life again.

Worrying about symptoms

'It is always on your mind. Every innocent cough strikes at your heart.'

At first you may worry that every ache, pain or feeling of sickness might mean that your cancer has come back. You may worry so much that you find yourself at your GP's office more than usual.

Try to remember that every symptom doesn't mean your cancer has come back. Everyone has aches and pains, coughs and colds.

Maybe you did not have symptoms when you were told your cancer diagnosis. It may have been picked up during a regular screening test for example. So how will you know if your cancer has come back?

Whatever your situation, it can be frightening. No matter how much your medical team, friends and family





Coping with the fear of your cancer coming back



provide reassurance, you still worry about your cancer coming back.

Some survivors say that because it happened once before without good reason, what's stopping it happening again? However, most survivors say that over time, their confidence builds up and they think less about their cancer coming back.

For some survivors, following these tips may

feel like hard work. You are only human.

Trying to stay fit, healthy and in touch with your emotions after what you have been through can feel like a lot of pressure.

So be kind to yourself, take your time and find what works best for you. Many cancer survivors say that with time, you will find your own way of coping with the possibility of your cancer coming back.

Practical tips to help you cope

Although your cancer doctor can help with many of your concerns about a cancer recurrence, you can also take steps to help lessen your fears.

- Don't be afraid to acknowledge and talk about your fears. Be honest with yourself, your family, friends, doctors and other support people about how you really feel. If you find this hard, try writing your feelings down in a journal or blog.
- Be aware of which symptoms might mean a cancer recurrence. Your doctor may have provided you with a list of symptoms to look out for in a survivorship care plan. Don't be afraid to make an appointment to see your doctor if you have a symptom that concerns you between follow-up appointments.
- Plan your follow-up appointments. Although most survivors find follow-up appointments and the time leading up to them stressful, it is important to keep them. Write down what you want to discuss with your doctor before you go. For example, symptoms you may have, fears of recurrence, problems with side effects and advice about how to prevent another cancer.
- Look after yourself. This means taking care of your mind and body. Try to eat a well-balanced diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, exercise regularly and get plenty of sleep. Avoid too much alcohol. Lack of sleep, a poor diet, alcohol and recreational drugs can worsen fears and anxiety. But remember to treat yourself every now and then. 'Everything in moderation' is a good motto. We don't want life to become boring!
- Attend regular cancer screening programs to detect bowel, breast and cervical cancer. If you have concerns about cancers not routinely screened for see your GP for advice. See 'Further information'.
- Try to enjoy yourself. Continue with your hobbies or take up new ones. And try to have a regular laugh too! Staying busy, being kind to yourself and having control over your life can help you cope better with your fears.
- Do things in your own time. Not everyone wants to know about the risk of their cancer coming back or survival statistics. So don't feel you have to find out, even if those close to you want the answers. If you do want detailed survival statistics your doctor will be able to give you these answers based on research studies and from their experience with other patients and what they know about your cancer. Do what feels right for you.
- Know where to get further help and support to suit your needs. Knowing who to contact for further help can be a great relief to many cancer survivors. If you are unsure about where to go for help you can call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 and speak with a cancer nurse. They can give you further information about coping with survivorship, counselling, joining a support group and getting help with any practical issues you may have (e.g. financial concerns).

Further information



The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing offers information about government screening programs: call BreastScreen (13 20 50), the national cervical screening program (13 15 56) or the bowel screening helpline (1300 738 365).



Cancer Council (13 11 20) booklets include 'Living well after cancer'.



Call the ACSC to find out about our wellness forums.



Through the Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20) you can speak with a cancer nurse: ask about Family Cancer Connect and support groups and other support services that may help you. Cancer Connect is a free phone peer support service that puts people in touch with others who've had a similar cancer experience.

All of these services may be accessed through their website.

Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

A Richard Pratt Legacy



Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

Locked Bag 1, A'Beckett Street
Melbourne VIC 8006

Email: contactacsc@petermac.org

www.petermac.org/cancersurvivorship