
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Coping with a Cancer Diagnosis

Learn About Your Diagnosis

It is easier to face the reality of a new or scary situation if you learn as much as you can about it. This advice certainly holds true for cancer. There is a great fear of the unknown and uncertainty of the outcome, but knowledge can help lessen these fears.

To make your medical appointments as useful as possible, try these suggestions:

- Make a list of questions to ask your health care team.
- Bring a family member or friend along to appointments with your doctor or your cancer care team. They can serve as an extra pair of ears and support. They can also remind you of additional questions to ask your providers.
- Take notes. If someone uses an unfamiliar word, ask them to spell it and explain it.
- Ask your health care team to explain things when you don't understand.
- Ask if important conversations can be tape-recorded.

There are many sources of patient education about cancer types, diagnosis, and treatment available via the Internet. Ask your behavioral health provider for the ***“Support and Information for Veterans and Families Living with Cancer”*** handout. This handout lists many highly informative, reputable websites about cancer you can access via the Internet at home or at your local library.

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Coping with the Emotional Side Effects

It's important to work through your feelings about cancer, because how you feel can change how you look at yourself, how you view life, and what decisions you make about treatment. There are ways to cope with the emotional "side effects" of

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cancer, just as there are ways to cope with the physical side effects of chemotherapy. You can draw support from many sources.

Here are some of the most important:

- *Ask for support from family, friends, and others.* Just having someone who cares and can listen to you can be very helpful. If friends or family members are not able to provide support, find others who can. Behavioral health providers, such as social workers, psychologists, or other licensed health professionals, and support groups are additional sources of support.
- *Seek spiritual support* through prayer or the guidance of a chaplain, pastor, rabbi, or other religious leader.
- *Find out what helped other patients* and families cope with cancer, and/or talk with other people diagnosed with the same type of cancer.
- *Allow yourself private time and space.*
- *Find ways to appropriately express your feelings.* Often, this means trying new things like writing about your feelings or talking more frequently with friends or family.
- *Keep a journal or diary while you're being treated.* A record of your activities and thoughts can help you understand the feelings you have as you go through treatment and highlight questions you need to ask your doctor or nurse. You can also use your journal to record side effects. This will help you discuss them with your doctor and nurse. You can also write down the steps you take to cope with side effects and how well those steps work. That way, you'll know which methods worked best for you in case you have the same side effects again.
- *Walk or exercise if you can* and if your medical provider approves. Using your body can make you feel better about yourself, help you get rid of tension or anger, and build your appetite.
- *Eating well is very important.* Your body needs food to rebuild tissues and regain strength. Some people experience changes in how food tastes, so you might need to experiment to find which foods taste best to you. Eating smaller, more frequent meals or snacks can also help.
- *Try to keep your treatment goals in mind.* This will help you keep a positive attitude on days when the going gets rough.
- *Take it easy.* Let the "small stuff" slide, and only do the things that are most important to you.
- *Some of your usual hobbies* or activities may be harder to participate in during cancer treatment. Exploring new hobbies or developing new skills can be a good way to cope with distress.

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Family and friends can be great sources of support. But sometimes others do not understand cancer or are even afraid of cancer. Others may withdraw from you at times because they worry that they will upset you by saying the wrong thing. You can help relieve their fears by talking openly with others about your illness, your treatment, your needs, and your feelings. You can also let people know that there's no single "right" thing to say and that it is helpful even if they just listen. Once people know they can talk with you honestly, they may be more willing and able to open up. At the same time, know that it's okay to not talk about your cancer diagnosis. Sometimes it's just as helpful to talk about non-cancer topics, too.

It's normal to sometimes feel angry, anxious, or down about having cancer. But if you feel sad all the time, are having trouble sleeping or thoughts of suicide, these are signs that professional help is needed. Other symptoms that may require treatment include feelings of panic, intense anxiety, or crying constantly. **If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, contact your VA medical or behavioral health provider right away. If you are in an emotional crisis and need additional help, report to your closest emergency room or call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.**

Support Groups

Support groups are made up of people who are going through the same kinds of experiences as you. Many people with cancer find they can share thoughts and feelings with group members more easily than with anyone else. *Support groups can also serve as an important source of practical information about living with cancer.* You can also find support in one-to-one programs that match you with a person similar to you in age, gender, type of cancer, and so forth. You might talk with this person on the phone or arrange visits.

Where to find information about support programs:

- Your local American Cancer Society office or by calling 1-(800)-ACS-2345
- See the handout on [*Support and Information for Veterans and Families Living with Cancer*](#) for information available on the Internet or by phone
- Ask your VA medical or behavioral health provider

Coping with Fatigue

Fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer treatment. Managing fatigue is an important part of care for you and your family.

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Fatigue is the feeling of being tired physically, mentally, and emotionally. It means having less energy to do the things you normally do or want to do. *Cancer-related fatigue is a different kind of tiredness that can occur with cancer or cancer treatment.* It can last a long time and can interfere with your usual activities. This is different from the fatigue of everyday life, which is usually temporary and relieved by rest. Cancer-related fatigue is more severe and more distressing. Rest does not always relieve it. For some people, this kind of fatigue can be even more distressing than pain, nausea/vomiting, or depression. Cancer-related fatigue can:

- vary in its unpleasantness, severity, and amount of time that it is present
- be overwhelming and hinder your ability to feel well
- make even being with your friends and family difficult
- decrease your ability to continue normal activities
- make it hard to follow your cancer treatment plan

During cancer treatment, you may find that you become tired more easily because your body uses more energy to handle the demands of cancer and treatment. Stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on normal cells may also contribute to fatigue.

Most people begin to feel tired after a few weeks of radiation therapy or chemotherapy. Fatigue usually increases as your treatment progresses. What causes cancer-related fatigue is not always clearly understood. But sometimes the cause of fatigue is clearly known. For example, if anemia (low red blood cell counts) is thought to be causing fatigue, the anemia will be treated. In some patients, treatment may include correcting fluid and mineral imbalances in the blood.

The use of physical activity, treatment of sleep problems, and correction of nutrition problems all seem to improve fatigue. Physical activity in particular can have a major effect. Education and counseling are part of the treatment and help people learn how to conserve energy, reduce stress, and use distraction to think about things other than the fatigue.

Fatigue will go away gradually after your treatment is finished. Until then, there are some things that you can do to help you deal with it:

- Make a list of your regular activities according to how important they are to you.
- Have a structured daily routine.
- Ask for help and delegate when you can.
- Place things that you use often within easy reach to save your energy.

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- Use methods to reduce stress, such as deep breathing, visual imagery, meditation, prayer, talking with others, reading, listening to music, painting, or any other activity that gives you pleasure.
- Balance rest and activities. Avoid too much bed rest, which can lead to feeling weak. Schedule activities so that you have time for plenty of rest. Shorter rest periods are reported to be better than one long one.
- Talk to your doctor about how to keep any pain, nausea, or depression under control.
- Discuss physical activity with your doctor before you start any program. Get fresh air, if possible.
- Unless you are given other instructions, eat a balanced diet that includes protein (meat, milk, eggs, and legumes), and drink plenty of water each day.

Only you know if you have fatigue and how severe it is. The best measure of fatigue comes from your own report to your medical or behavioral health provider. You can describe your level of fatigue as none, mild, moderate, or severe, or you can use a scale of 0 to 10, where a 0 means no fatigue, and a 10 is the worst fatigue you could imagine.

Let your medical provider know about your fatigue and talk with them if:

- Your fatigue does not get better, keeps coming back, or becomes severe.
- You are more tired than usual during or after an activity.
- You are feeling tired and it is not related to an activity.
- Your fatigue is not relieved by rest or sleep.
- You become confused or cannot concentrate.
- You are unable to get out of bed for more than 24 hours.
- Your fatigue disrupts your social life or daily routine.



How to Relieve Stress and Relax

Simple techniques can help you cope with stress and help you relax. *Stress management techniques have been shown to help improve mood, anxiety, pain, and overall quality of life.* Try some of these methods to find the ones that work best for you. You may want to check with your doctor before using these techniques, especially if you have lung problems.

Rhythmic Breathing

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes, or focus on a distant object if you prefer to keep them open.

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- Breathe in and out slowly and comfortably through your nose. If you like it, keep the rhythm steady by saying to yourself, "In, 1, 2; Out, 1, 2."
- Feel yourself relax and go limp each time you breathe out.
- You can continue this technique for just a few seconds or for up to 10 minutes.
- Rhythmic breathing is a very useful exercise that you can use alone or in combination with the other exercises below. It's best to practice it routinely once or twice a day. Also use it during periods of increased tension to help manage your distress in the moment.

Muscle Tension and Release

- Lie down in a quiet room.
- Take several slow, deep breaths.
- As you breathe in, tense a particular muscle or group of muscles. For example, clench your teeth or stiffen your arms or legs.
- Keep your muscles tense for 3 seconds while holding your breath.
- Then breathe out, release the tension, and let your body relax completely for about 20 seconds.
- Repeat the process with another muscle or muscle group.

A variation of this technique is called "progressive muscle relaxation." You work your way up your body starting with the toes of one foot. Progressively tense and relax all the muscles of one leg. Next, do the same with the other leg. Work your way up your body, tensing and relaxing each of the muscle groups in your body, including those in your neck and face. Remember to hold your breath while briefly tensing your muscles and to breathe out when releasing the tension.

It takes some practice to learn this technique. Don't worry about getting it right the first time. If you need additional help with this exercise, see your VA behavioral health provider who can give you additional support.

Mental Imagery and Visualization

- Close your eyes, breathe slowly, and feel yourself relax.
- Imagine a ball of healing energy, perhaps a white light forming somewhere in your body.
- When you see the ball of energy, slowly breathe in and guide the ball to any part of the body where you feel pain, tension, discomfort, or even nausea.
- Let the ball of energy rest in one spot. Continue to take rhythmic breaths. After a few moments, move the ball to another spot in your body where you feel discomfort. Continue to take rhythmic breaths.

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- Now picture the ball moving away from your body, taking with it any painful or uncomfortable feelings. You may see the ball getting smaller and smaller in the distance as it disappears along with your tension and discomfort.

With visualization you create an inner picture that represents your fight against cancer. You might visualize rockets blasting away the cancer cells in your body or knights in armor battling the cells. Both of these exercises can help reduce feelings of stress or discomfort. *If you have lung problems, don't worry about taking deep breaths -- just breath as you normally do.*

Distraction

Distract yourself from your worries or discomforts by watching TV, listening to the radio, reading, going to the movies, or working with your hands by doing needlework or puzzles, building models, or painting. *Distraction sounds obvious, but sometimes our thoughts get stuck or focused on ideas or events that make us anxious or depressed. By changing your mental focus, you may be surprised how comfortably the time passes.*

This handout was adapted from the American Cancer Society by Dr. Gregory P. Beehler. For more information, go to www.cancer.org.

These Information Sheets are designed to provide a brief overview of various medical conditions. Referring to the Information Sheets may help you communicate more effectively with other members of the Primary Care Team. The Information Sheets are by no means an exhaustive description of the disorders. If you need additional information, please engage in a more detailed search. Don't forget to consult with other members of the Primary Care Team. They are an invaluable source of information!