

Anxiety is a natural response to a cancer diagnosis, whether for ourselves or a loved one. Feeling anxious for a long period of time may require professional help. This fact sheet will cover the following:

- How to recognize anxiety
- The ways physical activity can help
- Getting help from others
- Relaxation techniques



The Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety may show itself in different ways. You may feel uncontrollable worry, lack of focus, irritation or difficulty completing work or chores. Physical symptoms may include tense muscles, trembling and shaking, headaches and more.

Long-term anxiety can lead to fatigue or depression. It may help to learn the times and places when your anxiety is most severe. This may lead to recognizing when episodes are coming and you may be able to use strategies to lessen the effects.



Engage in Physical Activity

Since anxiety affects the body as much as the brain, doing something active can sometimes make you feel better.

- **Engage in physical activity.** Exercise strengthens your ability to cope with cancer. It may be best to start small, especially if you are experiencing fatigue.
- **Walking is a gentle form of exercise.** Even short walks can improve your mood and change your perspective by getting you out and moving.

You should discuss with your health care team whether exercise is right for you, how much and how often.



The Benefits of Outside Help

Talk to your health care team. Update your health care team about how you feel. They can often provide resources to help you cope with the emotional impact of cancer.

Seek counseling. A counselor can provide a safe space to talk about your most powerful feelings as well as help find local resources and programs that fit your needs.

Join a support group. A support group is a chance to share your experience with others. CancerCare provides support groups for those with cancer, caregivers and the bereaved. These groups are moderated by an oncology social worker.



Mental Relaxation

Practice mind-body-spirit techniques. Activities such as yoga, meditation, visualization, tai chi, chi gong, prayer and singing can help restore our bodies, minds and hope. For more information, read our “Cancer and Yoga” and “Relaxation Techniques and Mind/Body Practices” fact sheets.

Here’s a simple breathing exercise that you can try.

- Sit down, place one hand on your chest and the other over your abdomen.
- Take three breaths and observe them. The chest tends to rise more than the abdomen.
- Take in a longer, deeper breath. Picture your lungs as balloons filling up slowly.
- Hold the breath and silently count to five. Then, exhale fully.
- Do this for three long breaths and then sit quietly for a moment. Most people find there is a calming feeling that follows.

If you feel as though you are panicking, a grounding technique would be a useful tool to help reduce some of your anxiety, such as:

- Name 5 things you can see. Breathe.
- Name 4 things you can hear. Breathe.
- Name 3 things you can smell. Breathe.
- Name 2 things you can taste. Breathe.
- Name 1 thing you can touch. Breathe.

Journaling. Journaling can help you process thoughts and feelings that are difficult to express otherwise. When you write about your worries and fears, you can review them later to be more aware of what thoughts are causing you to feel anxious and help you reframe those thoughts.

CancerCare® Can Help

For over 80 years, CancerCare has empowered millions of people affected by cancer through free counseling, resource navigation, support groups, educational resources, advocacy and direct financial assistance. Our oncology social workers improve the lives of people diagnosed with cancer, caregivers, survivors and the bereaved, by addressing their emotional, practical and financial challenges.

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