

Anxiety



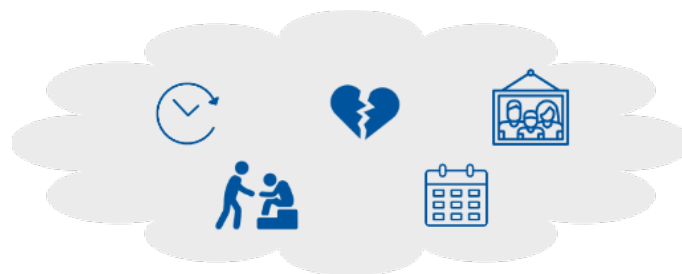
"I felt so wound up and tense, I couldn't sit still. I'd stand up, but then have nowhere to go, so I would just sit down again."

Kamila
Diagnosed with colon cancer

What is cancer-related anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, uncertainty or stress. It is completely normal to feel anxious or stressed when you have cancer.

- **How does it affect me?** Even mild anxiety can affect the quality of your everyday life. It can affect how you feel about situations and people. It can also affect your ability to do your daily activities at home and work. How anxiety is experienced can be very different from person to person.
- **Does it get better?** Feelings of anxiety can improve or get worse at different times. Depending on the cause, anxiety may come and go. For example, when you're waiting for test results. It may also feel like it's always there. For example, because of the uncertainty about the future. Self-management strategies have been shown to help improve anxiety in many cases. (See [What can I do to help manage my anxiety](#)).



What causes cancer-related anxiety?

Everyone usually feels some anxiety when they find out they have cancer. A cancer diagnosis can make you feel unsure and nervous about many things. You may feel more anxious as you wait for test results. Also, when making decisions about treatment and

dealing with the physical effects of cancer. Some—but not all—of the other things that may cause anxiety as you are coping with cancer include:

- Needing to depend on family and friends.
- Changes in relationships with family and friends.
- Feeling guilty about not having enough time for your family.
- Feeling stressed about having to organize medical appointments. Also balancing your personal and professional life.
- Worrying about the future.



What are the signs of anxiety?

Anxiety can have many different effects on your body and mind. Typical signs of anxiety include:

- Short temper, impatience.
- Unease, difficulty relaxing.
- Worrying more than usual.
- Loss of interest in social activities or seeing people.
- Difficulty with tasks or activities that you usually find easy.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Headaches.
- Loss of appetite.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Stomach discomfort.
- Fatigue.

- Dizziness.
- Diarrhea.
- Nausea.
- Choking sensation.



When should I get help for my anxiety?

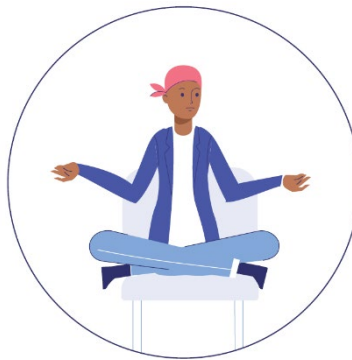
It is normal to feel anxious when you have cancer. However, if your anxiety is so bad that you feel like you can't cope, you should talk to your health care team. This can be your oncologist, psychologist, nurse, or pivot nurse at your next appointment. (For tips on talking with your healthcare team, see [Talking to your healthcare professional about your symptoms or concerns](#)). Consider if the following situations are true for you. If so, it may mean that your anxiety is too much for you to handle on your own.

- You feel “frozen”. You feel anxiety is preventing you from doing things you have to do or want to do.
- You experience any “signs of anxiety” very strongly and/or all the time. (See list above).
- You can't sleep through the night.
- Anxiety stops you from going to your medical appointments.
- You can't make the necessary decisions.
- Your worries and fears are hurting your relationships.
- You can't cope with your basic daily activities.
- You can't seem to enjoy life at all or look forward to the future.
- You frequently experience sudden shortness of breath. Also, sudden fast heartbeat or chest pains.



Talk to someone in your healthcare team immediately if:

- You have had an experience with depression or an anxiety disorder in the past.
- You have a history of physical or emotional trauma.
- You are having thoughts about harming or killing yourself. If you can't reach someone in your healthcare team, call Suicide Action Montreal at 1-866-277-3553 or call 9-1-1 or go to www.suicide.ca/en.



What can I do to manage my anxiety?

There are many things that you can do to manage your anxiety. Things to do to keep it from getting worse. You may want to use ways to cope with stress that have worked for you in the past. If these do not work as well as before, think about trying something else. You may have to test a few things to see what works best for you. Below are some suggestions you can try.



Keep a symptom diary.

- Keep a diary of when you feel anxiety. Write down:
 - When did it start?
 - What seems to make it worse?
 - What makes it better?
- Track if there's anything you do that lessens your anxiety. This can be meditation or exercise.
- For more information, see [Symptom Diary](#).



Learn more about your cancer

- Knowing more about your cancer and your treatment options. Also knowing about the side effects of treatment. This can help you feel more in control and less anxious.
- In between appointments, keep a list of questions to ask your oncologist at your next visit. You may worry less if you feel more prepared.
- When you feel anxious or stressed, it can be difficult to ask your doctor questions or speak up for yourself. However, being assertive in this way can help remove some uncertainty that may be causing your anxiety. This might make you feel a bit more in control.



Practice good sleep habits

- Sleeping well can give you more energy. This can help to reduce anxiety.
- If you are having trouble sleeping, before going to bed, try doing an activity that you know relaxes you. This can include listening to music, reading or meditating.
- It's recommended that you turn off computers and tablets at least one hour before you plan to go to bed. The bright screens of these devices can trick your brain into thinking it's daytime. This makes it harder to sleep.



Plan what you eat

- A healthy, balanced diet can help boost energy. This can improve your mood.
- Eat foods that contribute to physical and mental well-being. These include fruits and vegetables, foods rich in omega 3 fatty acids (e.g., salmon, mackerel, sardines, flaxseeds, soybeans) and B vitamins (e.g., eggs, dairy products, whole grains, broccoli, spinach).
- Limit foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt. These include processed foods and desserts. Also sugary drinks and fast food. Also, limit caffeine and alcohol. Both can make anxiety worse.
- Check with your healthcare team to learn about foods to avoid. Sometimes, there may be foods or drinks that you should not have because of your cancer or treatment.
- For more information see [Looking After Yourself](#).



Exercise

- Regular exercise can help improve your sleep. This may help you relax and reduce anxiety. It may also help you manage pain and fatigue better. It can improve your appetite.
- It is generally fine to exercise during treatment. Always check with your healthcare team before starting any exercise.
- Choose an activity or exercise that you enjoy doing or would like to try. See if you can fit it into your schedule without too much difficulty.
- Pay attention to what your body tells you. Only increase the amount and difficulty of your activity when you feel comfortable.
- For more information, see [Get Moving](#).

Practice relaxation strategies

Relaxation strategies are a useful way to help relax your mind and body. This can help to reduce anxiety. The good thing about these techniques is that they can be done almost anywhere.

- **Breathing exercises.** This technique focuses on slow, deep breathing. Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help you relax.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This involves tensing and relaxing a muscle. It can also be for a group of muscles, one at a time.
- **Guided imagery or visualization.** . It can help you to imagine being in a place that makes you feel calm in real life. Guided means someone talks you through the process in person or through a recording.
- **Meditation.** Meditation is a practice of quieting the mind. This is usually done by focusing attention on the breath. You can meditate sitting, lying down and even walking.
- **Massage therapy.** Use a certified massage therapist. They should have experience working with cancer patients.
- **Relaxation activities.** Some types of yoga and tai chi involve slow, meditative movements. These help relax the mind and body. Look for classes with trained instructors. This can help you learn the proper techniques.
- For more information, see [Relaxation Strategies](#).

Take care of yourself

Take a break from thinking and talking about cancer. Try to make some time to do something you enjoy every day. It could be as simple as listening to music or reading a book. It can be watching a funny movie or spending time with people who make you laugh.

- Make time for your hobbies. Think of creative outlets that have always brought you joy in the past. You might want to try something new that you've always wanted to do. This can be creative writing, art or music lessons.



Face your fears

Anxiety can cause you to avoid people or situations that make you tense. However, sometimes, the more you avoid what makes you anxious, the more anxious you become.

- You may be avoiding going out with a group of friends because you're afraid they might ask you about your cancer. To help, consider going and having an answer ready that you're comfortable with. This could be something like: "Thank you for asking, but I'd really just like to enjoy the evening and not think about cancer."



Connect with others and get support

- Don't try to deal with your problems all on your own. It can be difficult to ask for help, particularly from family and friends. However, it is important to let the people in your life know when you need help. This can prevent you from getting overwhelmed. Lean on family and friends. They can help with cooking, housework or babysitting. Also consider when you'd like someone to come with you to appointments.
- Talk about your feelings and fears. You can talk with a family member or friend who is a good listener. You might otherwise like to share your worries with people in a support group who have had experiences like you.
- You might prefer to talk to a professional counsellor, such as a psychologist. A psychologist can help you think about your worries differently. They may give you ideas to help you manage your anxiety.

Important information about cannabis

Some patients do use cannabis to reduce pain, help with relaxation or as a sleeping aid. However, the research is still unclear about the use of cannabis to manage cancer-related symptoms, including diarrhea. It is important to talk to your doctor before trying cannabis. For more information on what cancer patients should know about cannabis, go to: <http://www.bccancer.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/medical-cannabis>.

Resources

For more information on cancer-related anxiety, self-management strategies and support organizations, check out the resources below.

[BC Cancer – Anxiety](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Anxiety](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Coping When You Have Cancer](#)

[Cancer Care Ontario – How to Manage Your Anxiety](#) (download patient guide)

[Quebec Cancer Foundation – Anxiety and Depression](#)

[Anxiety Canada – Anxiety in Adults](#)

[Cancer.Net – Coping With Uncertainty](#)

[Canadian Psychological Association – “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Cancer in Adults](#)

[Info-aidant – Support for Caregivers \(info-aidant@lappui.org or call 1 855 852-7784\)](#)

Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- BC Cancer. Anxiety. 2018.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Coping With Anxiety and Stress. 2019.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Coping When You Have Cancer. 2017.
- Cancer Care Ontario. How to Manage Your Anxiety. 2016.
- Coping-Together. Dealing With Stress and Worry.
- Anxiety. 2016.
- Quebec Cancer Foundation. Anxiety and Depression. 2020.
- University Healthcare Network. Managing Anxiety After Cancer Treatment. 2017.

Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice or disregard professional medical advice because of the information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the fact sheet or because of any errors or omissions.

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