



Anxiety, Worries and Fears

Anxiety is the body's natural response to a real or perceived threat. Feeling anxious is the body's response to dangerous or stressful situations. Anxiety is a defense mechanism that manages our fight or flight reaction. Anxiety can help us process threats and cope or avoid real or perceived dangers. Anxiety can also be hard to cope with. It can make us have obsessive thoughts, worry, get stuck in our thoughts, or avoid things. It can also make us fearful, hyper-vigilant, or panicked. Anxiety is a problem when it does not go away, interferes with daily activities, or does not respond to behavior modification techniques.

Anxiety in cancer is common. It occurs at various time during your cancer experience (and everyday life!). Anxiety in cancer patients can be associated with the stress related to the diagnosis, treatment plan, change in roles, fear, and uncertainty about the future, fear of death, lifestyle changes, body changes, fear of recurrence, "scanxiety" or anxiety related to routine cancer screening tests, and financial concerns.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

Anxiety impacts the mind, and the body. Symptoms can include:

- **Cognitive:** Feeling like the walls are closing in or that you are trapped, or that going outside of your home is unsafe; you cannot focus on anything other than what is scaring you.
- **Emotional:** Feeling worried, fearful, nervous and like you are losing control.
- **Behavior:** Avoidant, immobility, inability to speak, crying, or screaming.
- **Physical:** Heart palpitations, fainting, shortness of breath, tremor, muscle tightness, restlessness, abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, shivering, feeling itchy, hot, or cold.

How is anxiety managed?

Anxiety is treated through a combination of behavioral and medical interventions. Understanding your cancer diagnosis, treatment, and expected side effects can be helpful in reducing anxiety.

The following tips can also help reduce your anxiety, especially when your anxiety is associated with "a fear of the unknown:"

- Ask questions about procedures so you know what to expect.
- Ask for written materials about your diagnosis, treatment, and potential side effects.
- Connect with others who have experienced a similar diagnosis and learn what helped them through treatment. Support groups and peer mentor connection programs can help us not feel so alone and help manage our worries.
- Talk to your family, friends, co-workers, and other support persons about what is happening to you. Chances are, they have also experienced anxiety in their own lives and can offer support and guidance.
- Be aware of potential anxiety triggers; for example, you may have a fear of needles, and the idea of having IVs placed weekly triggers an anxious response.
- Regular physical activity (exercise) releases natural pheromones that combat anxious feelings.
- Reduce alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine intake. Don't rely on substances to help manage your symptoms.

- Use relaxation techniques when facing anxiety-provoking situations. These may include meditation, deep breathing, listening to your favorite music, prayer, etc. Find what works best for you.
- Consider a referral to a cognitive-behavioral therapist who specializes in the treatment of anxiety and adjustment disorders. These therapists focus on re-framing thoughts, deep breathing, guided imagery, hypnosis, relaxation, and meditation to help manage anxiety.
- Prescription anti-anxiety medications can be very helpful in the management of situational and adjustment-related anxiety.

When to Contact Your Care Team

If you are having anxiety that is limiting your ability to perform or enjoy normal activities or is interfering with your sleep, concentration, or appetite, talk to your care team.

Severe anxiety can result in a panic attack. Symptoms associated with a panic attack mimic symptoms associated with a heart attack including heart palpitations (racing heartbeats that you can feel), shortness of breath, and sweating. If you think you are having a panic attack, contact your care team.

Resources for More Information

[Anxiety](#) – The American Cancer Society

[Anxiety resources](#) – CancerCare

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