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# How to Manage Your Anxiety



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have anxiety before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is cancer-related anxiety?

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It is a feeling of worry, fear or being nervous.

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It can come and go. Things like starting treatment or waiting for test results can make anxiety worse.

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## Low-level anxiety can make you:

Feel restless, worried and like you cannot relax

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Have tense muscles

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Have trouble sleeping

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Feel moody and stressed

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## Patient Story:

“I think it is 'normal' to have a mild level of anxiety while you have cancer, as long as it does not interfere with your ability to cope. With the right supports in place, patients should be encouraged to face their concerns, which can enhance their healing.”

• **Anxiety is normal for patients and families coping with cancer.**

• It often goes away on its own within days. If your anxiety lasts longer you may need help to manage it.

**High-level anxiety can cause anxiety attacks that come on quickly and are very strong. They can cause:**

Feelings of doom

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Shortness of breath

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Dizziness and nausea

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Chest pains

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Heart palpitations (a fast, fluttering or pounding heart)

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# What causes cancer-related anxiety?

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This picture shows some of the many reasons you may feel cancer-related anxiety:



# What can I do to help my anxiety?

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## Find support

Support from family, friends and your community can make you feel better and less alone.



### These tips can help you get support:

Talk to someone you trust and who is a good listener.

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Talk to someone at your place of worship. Spiritual or religious advice may help.

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Join a cancer support program to share stories with other people.

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Talk to a social worker about support programs at your cancer centre and in your community.

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**People who learn** about their cancer and treatment options often feel more in control and have less anxiety. Be ready for your appointments with a list of questions and bring a support person if you can.

Find out about support resources in your community by contacting the Canadian Cancer Society. Go to [www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

## Face your fears

Anxiety can cause you to avoid people or situations that make you feel anxious. This is called avoidance behaviour.

### Different types of anxiety can cause you to avoid different things:

**Panic disorder** – Crowds

**Social anxiety** – Interacting with people

**Phobias** – Things like needles or closed in spaces, like MRI machines

The more you avoid things that cause you anxiety, the more anxious you will become.

#### Be Safe!

- ✓ Never avoid tests, treatments, or information sessions with your health care team. Tell your health care team if you are anxious and get help.



## Focus on things that make you feel better

Think about the positive parts of your life and things you can control.



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Feel grateful for the things and people that bring you joy.

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Spend time with people who make you laugh.

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Try to avoid negative people and things that cause you stress.

## Improve your sleep

Getting good sleep can give you more energy and help you feel better emotionally.



### These tips can help improve your sleep:

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Set a time for planning and worrying in the early evening so that you don't think about these things when you are trying to fall asleep.

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Do relaxing activities like reading or listening to music before going to bed.

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If you do not fall asleep after 20 – 30 minutes, get out of bed. Only go back to bed when you feel like you may be able to fall asleep.

## Exercise and take care of your body

Exercise is a good way to help your anxiety and improve your mood.



Choose an activity you like that suits your health and fitness level.

Start slowly with light exercise like walking, swimming or yoga.

Go at your own pace. Slowly increase the amount and difficulty of your activities.

### Exercise can also:

- Give you more energy
- Help your pain
- Help a poor appetite
- Help you get better sleep
- Build stronger muscles
- Give you a feeling of well-being

### Be Safe!

- ✓ You can exercise at any time during or after treatment.
- ✓ Stop and rest if you feel sore, stiff or out of breath.
- ✓ Always talk to your health care team about how to exercise safely.

## Eat well

A balanced diet can help you feel more energetic and positive.



### These tips can help you eat well:

Eat something every 3 to 4 hours. You need fuel often to keep your mind and body working at their best.

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Keep healthy snacks on hand, like nuts, fruit, vegetables and yogurt.

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Eat lots of food rich in omega 3 fatty acids like, fish, flax seeds and walnuts. These foods can help improve your mood.

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Limit foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt (processed foods, desserts, sugary drinks, fast food).

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Limit caffeine (found in coffee, tea, cola and chocolate). It can make your anxiety worse.

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**Ask your health care team to refer you to a registered dietitian.** A dietitian can help you find ways to make a meal plan to help you feel better. Visit **[unlockfood.ca](https://www.unlockfood.ca)** or call **1-866-797-0000** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

For more healthy eating tips read the Canadian Cancer Society's 'Eating well when you have cancer' patient information booklet. Go to **[www.cancer.ca/publications](https://www.cancer.ca/publications)**



## Avoid alcohol and quit smoking



Alcohol makes people feel more down and have more anxiety. Even small amounts of alcohol can affect the way you feel.

The nicotine in cigarettes can also make your anxiety worse.

It may help to cut down or quit smoking but sometimes people feel more nervous or on edge when they are quitting.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about making a plan that is right for you.

A quit plan might include nicotine replacement therapy (like a patch or gum) or medication to help with urges to smoke.

Do not use any illegal drugs to treat anxiety. Marijuana is not a good treatment for anxiety because it may make you have less energy or not think as clearly.

### **Quitting can be hard. Here are some resources to help you:**

- Smokers Helpline, Canadian Cancer Society  
[www.smokershelpline.ca](http://www.smokershelpline.ca)
- Ontario Drug and Alcohol Helpline  
[www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca](http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca) or 1-800-565-8603

## Make lists of calming, enjoyable and useful activities



**When you feel anxious, get your list and choose an activity.**

### **Include:**

Things you enjoy, like going for a walk, watching your favourite TV shows or taking a bath.

Things you need to do, like chores and appointments.

Put all of your chores into a daily or weekly schedule. Doing them will help you feel in control and useful.

Do your activities even if you do not enjoy them as much as usual or feel up to doing them.

## Try relaxation activities

These activities may help you relax and manage the stress you feel in your body.



Mindfulness meditation training

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Massage

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Yoga

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Acupuncture

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Hypnosis

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Music or art therapy

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Deep breathing

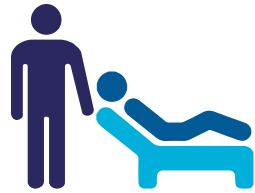
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Guided imagery (imagining yourself in a pleasant, calm place)

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## Get counseling to help you cope

With professional counseling you can learn different ways of thinking and acting to help you cope with your anxiety.



### Talk to your health care team about seeing a psychosocial oncology professional, like a:

Psychiatrist

Psychotherapist

Psychologist

Social worker

**Ask at your cancer centre** or community hospice about coping or stress management group programs.

Counseling can also be called psychotherapy.

## Take prescribed medications

If your anxiety does not get better you might need to take medication to control it.



### There are two types of medication used for anxiety

Anti-anxiety medications are usually taken for short periods of time to treat acute anxiety. They work quickly but can be addictive if used for too long.

happens with depression. They may take several weeks to work but are not addictive.

Anti-depressants are often used to treat anxiety that lasts for longer periods, is more severe, or

**Ask your health care team** if medication is right for you.

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away, go to your nearest emergency room or call 911 if you feel:**

Your anxiety is so bad that you are thinking about harming or killing yourself

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Sudden shortness of breath, dizziness or a fast heartbeat that is new (this may be anxiety but could also be a sign of an urgent medical problem)

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## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your anxiety.



0 is no anxiety and 10 is the worst possible anxiety.

**0-3**

You may have **Mild** anxiety if:

Anxiety symptoms are mild and only bother you sometimes.

You may feel some worry about the future, about your illness and your family. You can sleep, eat and concentrate most of the time.

**4-6**

You may have **Moderate** anxiety if:

You have low-level symptoms of anxiety that don't go away or are there for a big part of the day.

Your anxiety affects some of your day to day activities. You may have some trouble making decisions, concentrating, and sleeping.

You have some anxiety attacks.

**7-10**

You may have **Severe** anxiety if:

You have strong feelings of worry and restlessness most of the time. You cannot relax or feel calm.

You often have regular anxiety attacks.

Your anxiety stops you from doing your day to day activities. You have major trouble making decisions and concentrating.

You cannot sleep or eat.

You feel like life is out of control.

**Your anxiety may need treatment if it:**

Is moderate or severe

Lasts more than 2-3 weeks

Stops you from going to medical appointments or treatments

You also have symptoms of depression like feeling down most of the time or losing interest in activities that you used to like

# Where can I get more information?

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For more links to helpful information go to [www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### Anxiety Canada

[www.anxietycanada.ca](http://www.anxietycanada.ca)

### Cancer Care Ontario

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

### Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

## Self-management class:

### Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions

[www.healthy-living-now.ca/](http://www.healthy-living-now.ca/)

> What if I Live Elsewhere

### Online Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Class (free)

[www.palousemindfulness.com](http://www.palousemindfulness.com)

## Self-help and support websites:

### Mood Gym

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

### Cancer Chat Canada

[www.cancerchat.ca](http://www.cancerchat.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society Support services

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### Progressive muscle relaxation

[www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com) and search progressive muscle relaxation

## Online book:

### The Emotional Facts of Life with Cancer: A guide to Counselling and Support for Patients, Families and Friends

Go to [www.capo.ca](http://www.capo.ca) > patient family resources > how do I get more information

## Apps:

### The Scarborough Hospital Mental Health App Library

[www.tsh.to](http://www.tsh.to) - search Mental Health App Library

The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Managing anxiety after cancer treatment (University Health Network)
- Tips to Help You Manage Your Cancer Symptoms: Anxiety (Ottawa Hospital)
- Anxiety (Sunnybrook Odette Cancer Centre)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about anxiety. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing anxiety. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

**Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:

[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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Version 1 – 2016

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