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PDF generated on July 31, 2016 from

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Coping With Uncertainty [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 10/2015

Many people with cancer may feel a lack of certainty about what the future holds. After a cancer diagnosis, you may feel that your life is less secure than it once was. It is important to ask for support when you are feeling this way. There are many resources to help you.

Causes of uncertainty

Both newly diagnosed patients and long-term survivors have common worries, which are listed below.

- **Having to put plans on hold.** You may feel like you are unable to look to the future. Making plans is difficult for many practical reasons. For instance, it may be hard to plan a family vacation when you may not know exactly when you will have treatment. You may not be able to commit to a lunch date because you cannot predict how you will be feeling. Some people feel unable to make any plans. One approach that works well for many people with cancer is to remain flexible and accept that plans may change.
- **Fear about cancer treatments and their side effects.** You may be apprehensive or even scared of the side effects of treatment, such as pain, nausea, or fatigue. Or, you may fear becoming dependent on others during cancer treatment or missing activities that you enjoy. Learn more about [coping with the fear of treatment side effects](#) [3].

Long-term cancer survivors may worry about having [late effects](#) [4]. These are side effects of cancer treatment that occur months or years after treatment ends. Talk with your health

care team about what you can expect from late effects. There are resources that are available if you need help.

- **The treatment won't work.** No treatment works the same for every patient, even those with the same type of cancer. Some treatments are more effective for some people. Other treatments may work but cause side effects. Understanding what your treatment options are today and in the future may help you know what to expect next.
- **The treatment will stop working.** Many times, people continue to receive a cancer drug until it stops working. This is especially true for those with cancer that has spread or those with cancer that is controlled with drugs for a long time. It is scary to think the drug could stop working, even if you know there are other treatments you can take.
- **The cancer will come back.** A cancer recurrence is when the cancer returns after treatment. It is a top fear of many cancer survivors. If you worry about this, you may find yourself paying attention to every new symptom in the body. In turn, this too can increase your general level of anxiety. Learn more about [coping with the fear of recurrence](#) [5].
- **Fear of dying or losing someone you love.** Confronting the idea of dying can be difficult. Feeling fear is natural when you face the prospect of dying or losing someone you love. It's normal to struggle with a fear of death. Yet, if these feelings become severe, talk with your health care team about resources to help you cope.

Dealing with the “what ifs” of cancer

Acknowledging the unknowns of cancer may lead to other feelings, such as anxiety, anger, sadness, or fear. It may even manifest itself as physical sensations. For instance, it may interrupt sleep or decrease your ability to concentrate at work. Learning to manage the uncertainty is an important part of staying healthy. Follow these tips to help you cope:

- Recognize there are situations you can control and those you can't. As hard as it sounds, many people find it helpful to let go of those things that they can't change and focus on their reaction to events.
- Talk with your health care team if your feelings of uncertainty are affecting your daily life. They can help you find the resources you need to feel better.
- Talk with a counselor or social worker at the hospital. They may recommend a [support](#)

[group](#) [6] in your area. A group may help you share with others who are going through a similar cancer experience. There are also [support communities online](#) [7].

- Talk with friends and family members. Tell them how you are feeling and how they can help.
- Learn as much as you can about cancer and its treatment. Having the right information can help you know what to expect.

More Information

[Counseling](#) [8]

[Managing Stress](#) [9]

[Side Effects](#) [10]

[Cancer.Net Podcast: Scanxiety](#) [11]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/managing-emotions/coping-with-uncertainty>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24492>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25396>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25241>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24589>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/32186>