Coping With Fear of Recurrence

The end of cancer treatment can bring both relief and worry. You may be relieved that your treatment is finally over and pleased that your cancer is in remission (the temporary or permanent absence of cancer). However, you may also feel worried, anxious, or fearful that your cancer may recur (come back).

Cancer recurrence is the return of cancer after a period when no cancer cells could be detected in the body. The fear of recurrence is normal and reasonable for cancer survivors, especially during the first few years your cancer is in remission. It is important to remember that although you cannot control whether your cancer recurs, you can control how much you let the fear of recurrence affect your life.

Tips for coping

Accept your fears. It is common to experience some fear about your cancer recurring. Telling yourself not to worry or criticizing yourself for being afraid won't make these feelings go away. Accept that you are going to experience some fear and focus on finding ways to help yourself manage the anxiety [1].

It may also help to remember that the fear usually lessens over time, and that you won't always feel so anxious. Be aware that your anxiety may temporarily increase at certain times, such as before follow-up care appointments, around the anniversary date of your diagnosis, or if a friend is diagnosed with cancer.

Don't worry alone. Talking about your fears and feelings or writing down your thoughts in a journal [2] can help reduce your anxiety. Talking and thinking about your concerns can help you explore the issues underlying your fear. Fear of recurrence might include fear of having to repeat cancer treatment, losing control of your life, or facing death.

Many cancer survivors find joining a support group [3] to be helpful. Support groups offer the chance to share feelings and fears with others who understand, as well as to exchange practical information and helpful suggestions. The group experience can also create a sense of belonging that helps you feel less alone and more understood.

Talk with your doctor about regular follow-up care. After finishing treatment, you may find it helpful to have a record of your treatment and a plan for your follow-up care. Find out more about cancer treatment plans and summaries [4] and how they can help you develop a customized follow up care plan with your doctor. Thinking of yourself and your doctor as partners in charge of your health care decisions helps you feel more in control.

Be well informed. Most cancers have a predictable pattern of recurrence. Although a doctor cannot tell you exactly what will happen to you, an oncologist familiar with your history will be able to give you specific information about whether the cancer might recur and what symptoms to look for. Knowing what to expect can help you stop worrying that every ache or pain means your cancer is back.

Adopt a healthy lifestyle. Eating a well-balanced diet [5], exercising regularly [6], and getting enough sleep helps you feel better physically and emotionally. Doctors do not know why cancer recurs in some people and not in others, but avoiding unhealthy habits, like smoking [7] and excessive drinking [8], may help reduce the risk of recurrence. Adopting a healthy lifestyle will also lower your chances of developing other health problems. Read more about making positive lifestyle changes [9].

Reduce stress. Finding ways to lower your stress will help lower your overall level of anxiety. Experiment with different ways of reducing stress to find out what works best for you.

- Spend time with family and friends
- Spend time on hobbies and other activities you enjoy
- Take a walk, meditate, or enjoy a bath
- Exercise regularly
- Find time for humor?read a funny book or watch a funny movie
- Join a support group
- Avoid unnecessary stress?€”don't take on unnecessary responsibilities or commit yourself to tasks you don't have time for
- Simplify your life

Learn more about managing stress [10].

When you need more help

Despite your best efforts to stay well, you may find yourself overwhelmed by fear or recurrent thoughts of illness. If in doubt, talk with your doctor or nurse and consider a referral for counseling. Read about the benefits of counseling [11].

The following feelings may point to a diagnosis of anxiety or depression:

- Being worried or anxious most of the time, so that it gets in the way of your relationships or work, or prevents you from going to your follow-up care appointments
- Feeling hopeless about your future
- Having trouble sleeping or eating well
- Not participating in activities you used to enjoy
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Being unusually forgetful

More Information

Dealing With Cancer Recurrence [12]

Telephone and E-Mail Helplines [13]

Depression and Anxiety [14]

Additional Resources

*LIVE**STRONG***: Fear of Recurrence [15]

National Cancer Institute: Facing Forward Series: Life After Cancer Treatment [16]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/vgn-ext-templating/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=96f041eca8daa010VgnVCM100000ed730ad1RCRD
[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Finding+Comfort+Through+Journaling
[3] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links/General+Cancer+Organizations+and+Resources/Support+Groups
[4] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Survivorship/ASCO+Cancer+Treatment+Summaries
[5] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Risk+Factors+and+Prevention/Diet+and+Nutrition
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Risk+Factors+and+Prevention/Physical+Activity/Physical+Activity%3A+Suggestions+and+Tips
[7] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Risk+Factors+and+Prevention/Tobacco
[8] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Risk+Factors+and+Prevention/Diet+and+Nutrition/Alcohol
[9] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Making+Positive+Lifestyle+Changes+After+a+Cancer+Diagnosis
[10] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Managing+Stress
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25042
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/24698
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/26011
[15] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Fear-of-Recurrence
[16] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment