

Anxiety and Depression

■ What are anxiety and depression?

Anxiety is a feeling of being nervous, on edge, worried, or overwhelmed. Most people feel nervous when facing cancer because anxiety is a normal response to anything your body thinks is a threat. Uncertainty about the future and what to expect after a diagnosis are common causes of cancer anxiety. When anxiety goes on for a long time or if it gets in the way of doing what you need to do to take care of yourself, then learning ways to reduce it will be important. Anxiety can occur with depression.

Depression often begins with feeling sad and losing interest in doing things that you used to enjoy. This feeling is a common reaction to cancer during and after treatment. Normal sadness comes and goes. If it is persistent and continues every day for weeks, it may be what doctors call “clinical depression.” Like anxiety, depression can range from mild to severe. It may be helpful to tell your doctor if you had a history of clinical depression before your cancer diagnosis. Together you may recognize when the persistence of sadness and anxiety feels like a previous episode of depression instead of the sadness and worry that would typically come with a cancer diagnosis.



■ How can anxiety and depression affect my cancer care?

Anxiety and depression can cause distress and suffering that make it harder to cope with cancer treatment. You may have trouble making choices about your care, which may lead to poorer treatment outcomes. Anxiety and depression can also affect your daily life and relationships. It may cause you to avoid seeking the support you need from loved ones and the health care team.

■ What are the symptoms of anxiety and depression?

Symptoms of “acute anxiety” occur in short episodes, called panic attacks, that may happen without warning. These can include an intense feeling of fear or dread, a feeling of detachment, rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, chest pain, sweating, and dizziness. “Chronic anxiety” stays over time. It includes episodes of acute anxiety, along with symptoms such as excessive worrying, restlessness, inability to sleep, fatigue, concentration issues, and irritability.

Being sad or tearful most of the time for at least 2 weeks is the main symptom of depression. You may also feel a sense of hopelessness, worthlessness, or guilt, or have thoughts of harming yourself. Other symptoms may include withdrawing from friends and family, loss of interest in activities that usually give pleasure, and a loss of motivation. In addition, symptoms can include sleep problems, fatigue, loss of appetite, aches, pains, constipation, and poor concentration. Some of these can be caused by cancer and its treatment, so your doctor will consider many factors when diagnosing depression.

■ Are there treatments for anxiety and depression?

Yes, and many are used together. For mild anxiety or depression, talking with a mental health professional, such as a licensed clinical social worker, counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist, can help relieve symptoms. This is called “psychological treatment” or “counseling.” These professionals provide tools to improve coping skills, develop a support system, and decrease negative thoughts. For moderate or severe anxiety or depression, a psychiatrist may prescribe an antidepressant or other medications. Combining medication with counseling often works better than either one alone. Controlling cancer treatment side effects, such as pain, sleep problems, and fatigue, is also important. Exercise, healthy eating, and relaxation techniques may help, too.

■ How can I get help for anxiety or depression?

People sometimes may feel embarrassed or scared to talk about their anxiety or depression, but it’s important to take that first step. If you think you have symptoms of anxiety or depression, tell your health care team immediately. The symptoms checklist on the back of this fact sheet can help you start the conversation. Although it may be hard, try to talk openly with the team about the effects the symptoms are having on you. This will help them create a treatment plan that is right for you.

■ Risk factors for anxiety and depression

ASCO recommends an evaluation for depression and anxiety when you are first diagnosed with cancer and on a regular schedule throughout your treatment and recovery. This is very important for people who have a higher risk for these conditions. Be sure to tell your doctor about any of the following:

- I have a previous diagnosis of depression or anxiety.
- I have a family history of depression or anxiety.
- I do not have a support system of friends or family.
- I am struggling financially with cancer care costs and/or keeping a job.
- I am experiencing side effects from my cancer or cancer treatments that have not been treated.
- I have stress in my life from things other than cancer.

■ Do you need help with anxiety or depression?

Talk with your doctor immediately if you check any of these boxes:

- I feel sad or down.
- I feel worthless.
- I feel numb.
- I feel hopeless.
- I feel irritated.
- I cry a lot.
- I do not enjoy things I used to enjoy.
- I am withdrawing from people.
- I have trouble focusing or making decisions.
- I am having trouble remembering things.
- I have lost my appetite or am eating too much.
- I am not able to sleep.
- I sleep too much.
- I have a feeling of intense fear or dread.
- I cannot stop worrying.
- I am restless or constantly tense.
- I feel detached from myself and my surroundings.
- I have a rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, sweating, or other unexplained health issues.
- I have thoughts of harming myself or others.

Are you having thoughts about suicide?

If you are thinking about or planning to harm or kill yourself, tell your family or doctor immediately. If you feel you are in crisis and cannot reach anyone, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**. This is a free and confidential service that is always open. Remember, you do not have to face anxiety, depression, or cancer alone. There are ways to relieve your suffering besides suicide.

Find more information about coping with anxiety, depression, and other emotions and feelings that being diagnosed with cancer can cause at www.cancer.net/coping.

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