



# Living well after cancer

**Each year, many people with cancer are successfully treated. It's common for people who have cancer to live a long time after treatment. Some people are cured. This fact sheet is for people who have finished cancer treatment, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy. These people may be called 'cancer survivors'.**

**There are more than 700,000 people in Australia who have had cancer. This number is growing due to earlier detection and better treatment.**

## When treatment finishes

During cancer treatment, you might have felt that your life was on hold. Now that treatment has ended, you might expect life to return to normal. However, it can be hard to get back to your daily activities. You might feel and look different.

With time, survivors often find a new way of living. Many people call this a 'new normal'.

## Your feelings

It's common for people to have mixed feelings when treatment ends. You might need time to stop and look back on what has happened before you can think about the future.

Common feelings include:

- relief that treatment has finished
- loneliness or isolation
- a sense of loss and grief for how life used to be
- guilt that you don't feel happy
- anxiety about returning to normal life
- tired or run down
- happy or motivated to try new things or make lifestyle changes
- scared about the cancer coming back.

How you feel will depend on the type of cancer and treatment you had and what other support you have. Any side effects from your treatment will also play a big part.

Some people find their family and friends don't understand their feelings. Your loved ones want the distress of cancer to be behind you, and they may not realise that the cancer experience doesn't necessarily stop when treatment ends.

It may be helpful to allow yourself time to adjust to these changes, and to explain to your friends and family that you need their support. Knowing that these feelings are natural, and how to manage them, is an important part of being a cancer survivor.

## Tips

- Focus on each day and expect both good and bad days.
- Do things at your own pace. Avoid pressure to make decisions or start new activities right away. Plan rest time between activities.

- If you feel apprehensive about going out for the first time, ask someone you love and trust to come along.
- If people don't know how to react, try not to get upset. Some people avoid contact because cancer brings up difficult emotions.
- Share your feelings and worries with family and friends.
- Talk to your doctor if you are concerned about depression.
- Practise some form of relaxation, such as meditation, yoga or deep breathing. Some people like to relax by doing other things, such as gardening, reading, cooking or listening to music.
- Keep a journal to write down your feelings.
- Read other survivors' stories. Learning how other people have understood a cancer diagnosis may help.

Some people find that the weeks, months and years after treatment finishes is a time to look back on their lives. They may reassess what is important and fulfilling, or make changes to their lifestyle.

## Fear of the cancer coming back

Feeling anxious and frightened about the cancer coming back (recurrence) is the most common fear for cancer survivors, especially in the first year after treatment. For some people, this fear may affect their ability to enjoy life and make plans for the future. Living with this fear has been described as a shadow on your life.

It may help to talk to your doctor about your risk of recurrence. This is different for each person. It depends on many factors including the type of cancer, stage at diagnosis, treatment and time since treatment. Generally, the more time that goes by, the less likely it is that the cancer will come back. Some survivors say that their fears lessen with time.

## Follow-up care

After your treatment has finished, you may need regular check-ups. These will allow your doctor to monitor your health and wellbeing.

The frequency of check-ups varies depending on the type of cancer you had. Some people have check-ups every 3–6 months for the first few years after treatment, then less frequently thereafter. You may want to ask your doctor about what the government's standards and recommendations are on follow-up treatment periods.

**Many people worry that every ache or pain is a sign that cancer has come back. This is unlikely, but if you are worried, or if you experience new or different symptoms, contact your doctor. Don't wait until your next scheduled appointment.**

## Where can I get reliable information?

**Cancer Council NSW 13 11 20** – Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

**Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) 13 14 50**