

# Living Well After Cancer

*A guide for people affected by cancer*

Each year, many people with cancer are successfully treated. This fact sheet is for people who have finished cancer treatment.

## When treatment ends

During cancer treatment, you might have felt that your life was on hold. When treatment ends, you may expect life will soon return to normal. However, it can be hard to get back to your usual activities. You might feel and look different.

With time, people often find a new way of living after cancer. This process is commonly called finding a new normal – it may take months or years.



More than 1.2 million people living in Australia today have been diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime. This number is growing as more cancers are found earlier and treatments keep improving.

## 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
- fear that cancer will come back (recur)
- a sense of loss or grief for how life used to be
- being more emotional or teary
- feeling tired or run down
- anger about how cancer has affected your life
- hopeful about the future.

## Ways to cope after cancer treatment ends



- Focus on each day – expect both good and bad days.
- Do things at your own pace. Avoid pressure to make decisions or start new activities right away.
- If you can, share how you feel with family, friends and your community.
- Talk to your doctor if you are concerned you may be depressed or you would like to speak with a psychologist or counsellor.
- Practise some form of relaxation, such as meditation, yoga, tai chi or deep breathing. Some people like to relax by doing other things, such as gardening, reading, cooking or listening to music.
- Write down your feelings in a journal.
- Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 (see *Where to get help and information* on page 3).

Give yourself time to adjust to life after cancer treatment. Managing your feelings is an important part of living well after cancer.

*“After my treatment, a psychologist explained that it’s common to feel like you’ve had the rug pulled out from underneath you. It’s also common to question your view of the world and your beliefs.”* DAVID

### Lifestyle choices

It's important to look after yourself after cancer treatment. This may mean making lifestyle changes and embracing new ways to stay healthy. Planning how to look after yourself can help give you back a sense of control. Your plan could include:

#### Stop smoking and vaping



Aim to quit smoking and vaping. Quitting can be hard, particularly if you feel anxious. For support, talk to your doctor or call Quitline on 13 78 48 (Quitline can provide interpreters).

#### Eat well



Eat a balanced diet from the 5 food groups – vegetables and legumes, fruit, wholegrains, meat (or alternatives) and dairy. Limit saturated fat and added salt and sugars.

#### Limit alcohol



Limiting or avoiding alcohol will reduce the risk of cancer and improve your general health and wellbeing. Drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week.

#### Be physically active



Doing any physical activity is better than doing none. To avoid overdoing it, start physical activity slowly and build up gradually. Talk to your specialist or GP about any precautions you should take, and the amount and type of exercise that is right for you.

#### Be SunSmart



Protect yourself from the sun by:

- wearing clothing that covers your shoulders, arms, legs and body
- using an SPF 50 or SPF 50+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen at all times outdoors
- wearing a hat that shades your face, neck and ears
- protecting eyes with sunglasses that meet the Australian Standard
- seek shade.

### Returning to work

Whether you are self-employed or an employee, you may worry about whether you can do your job the same way as before. Some people choose to go back to work slowly, doing fewer hours or tasks at first. Others feel ready to return to their usual work straightaway.

If you are an employee, consider creating a written return-to-work plan when you are ready to return to work. This is a document prepared by you, your doctor and your employer outlining your approach to returning to work.

### Follow-up care

After your treatment has finished, you will most likely need regular check-ups. These will allow your doctor to monitor your health and wellbeing, manage any long-term side effects from treatment and check that cancer has not come back or spread.

How often you have check-ups will depend 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 often. If you are worried or notice any new symptoms between appointments, contact your GP straightaway.

## Fear of cancer coming back

Feeling anxious and frightened about the cancer coming back (recurrence) is the most common fear for people after cancer treatment. Most people are likely to experience this fear to some degree, and it may come and go for many years.

### Ways to cope with the fear of cancer coming back

- Ask your doctor about the chance of cancer coming back (recurring).
- Ask how to tell the difference between normal aches, pain or sickness and cancer symptoms.
- Focus on things you can control, such as lifestyle changes and going to follow-up appointments.
- Learn to manage signs of stress and anxiety through activities like mindfulness meditation, breathing exercises or going for walks.
- Talk to a counsellor or psychologist if the fear of recurrence is overwhelming.
- Join a support group to talk with others who understand how you feel.
- Try doing something creative, such as drawing, painting or writing. These sorts of activities can help you work through your feelings and may also help you relax.

### Where to get help and information in your language



- **Call Cancer Council 13 11 20.** We can connect you with interpreter services and provide resources in your language.
- **Call TIS National on 131 450.** This is a free interpreting service that can connect you with an interpreter you can use for your medical appointments or to contact Cancer Council.

#### ► How to find this resource in English and other languages.

Visit our multilingual hub at [cancercouncil.com.au/multilingual](https://cancercouncil.com.au/multilingual) or scan this QR code.



### Acknowledgements

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[See our website](#) for the list of expert and consumer reviewers for this fact sheet.

### Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

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Cancer Council NSW acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present.

