Cancer Council

PRACTICAL SUPPORT fact sheet

Life After Cancer: Rural and Regional Areas

A guide for people living outside major cities who are affected by cancer

It can take time to adjust to life after cancer. Living in rural and regional areas may bring extra challenges. This fact sheet explains what happens after treatment. It covers follow-up care, managing side effects, ways to stay well, and finding health support when services are not nearby.

How you might feel

After treatment ends, it's normal to have mixed feelings. You may feel relieved, anxious, or uncertain about what comes next.

If you live in a rural or regional area, you may also worry about:

- being far from your cancer specialist if something changes with your health
- who to contact between appointments
- where to find practical and emotional support in your area.

These feelings and concerns are common. You can talk to your general practitioner (GP) or a counsellor about how you are feelings. You can also call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to talk it through with our qualified professionals. This service is free and confidential.

What is "survivorship"?

Survivorship means living with and beyond cancer. It starts from the day you're diagnosed and includes the time during treatment, after treatment, and living with ongoing cancer. Survivorship care focuses on your physical and emotional health, managing side effects, and staying well.

Getting used to life after treatment

Life after treatment for cancer can feel different. It often takes time to adjust. You may be managing side effects from treatment, have worries about the cancer coming back, or be dealing with changes in how you feel physically and emotionally.

If you live in a rural or regional area, getting used to life after treatment may also include things like managing ongoing travel for follow-up appointments and tests, or having less support close to home.

Many people describe this time as finding a "new normal", as they learn how to look after themselves and move forward.



For people in rural and regional areas, survivorship can bring extra challenges. You may need to travel long distances to see specialists, and there may be fewer local health and support services. It's also common to feel more isolated once regular contact with your cancer care team reduces, so finding the right support – whether close to home or online – can be an important part of staying well.

Support for carers

Carers in rural and regional areas can often take on more than people might realise. You may have spent months travelling to appointments, managing the home, farm or business, and being the main source of support.

Now that treatment has finished, you might feel relieved but also burnt out, worried, or unsure what comes next. If you are a carer looking for some support, you can contact:

- **Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 –** talk to a qualified professional about services for carers
- **Carer Gateway –** free counselling, respite care and practical support. Call 1800 422 737 or visit carergateway.gov.au
- **your GP –** they can help with your own health needs, including a mental health treatment plan for psychology sessions.



Follow-up care

After treatment, you may have check-ups for several years. Some people have check-ups every few months at first, then less often. Appointments are usually with your cancer specialist or your GP. They monitor your health and watch for any signs that the cancer might come back (recurrence).

How often you have follow-up appointments will depend on:

- the type of cancer and treatment
- any side effects you're managing
- other health conditions.

If you live in a rural or regional area, you may need to travel for appointments. Ask your cancer care team if any appointments can be done by telehealth (phone or video call, see page 3) or through "shared care" with your local GP.

In shared care, your GP and cancer specialist work together to manage your follow-up care. You may see your GP for some appointments and your specialist for others. Your GP keeps in touch with your specialist about your care.

Ask for a survivorship care plan

When you finish cancer treatment, your cancer care team can provide a written record of:

- the cancer you had and the treatment you received
- possible late or ongoing side effects to watch for
- when and how often you need follow-up appointments and tests
- who to contact if you have concerns.

This written record is often called a survivorship care plan.

If you live in a rural or regional area, a survivorship care plan is especially important. It makes sure your local GP and other health professionals know what treatment you've had, any ongoing issues to manage, and what to watch for.

A plan can help you access the right care closer to home. Ask your cancer care team for a written plan.

Working with your GP

If you live in a rural or regional area, your GP is often the most important member of your healthcare team – especially when treatment finishes and you see your specialist less often. A GP can be your main contact for day-to-day health needs and help coordinate your care between local services and specialists as needed. Your GP can:

- order some tests and scans
- help you manage ongoing symptoms or side effects
- refer you to other health professionals like physiotherapists, dietitians or psychologists
- see you between specialist visits
- attend telehealth appointments with your specialist if you wish and they agree.

Make sure your GP knows what treatment you had and has a copy of your survivorship care plan.

> In more remote areas, there can be a shortage of GPs or it may take time to find one you can see regularly. If you don't already have a regular GP, you can search for one in your area using Healthdirect's service finder (healthdirect.gov.au/australian-health-services). You can also ask your treatment team, local hospital, or community health service for suggestions.

What other health professionals might I see when treatment ends?

Different health professionals can support your wellbeing after treatment. Many are known as allied health professionals. They can help you build strength, manage side effects and adjust to daily life after treatment.

Allied health professionals who may help after cancer include:

- physiotherapists
- occupational therapists
- exercise physiologists
- dietitians
- psychologists or counsellors
- social workers
- speech pathologists.

For people living in rural and regional areas, allied health services may not be nearby. This can mean travelling for appointments, waiting longer for appointments, or using telehealth if available (see below). Your GP or cancer care team will try to refer you to an allied health professional who is nearby.

Ask your GP whether a chronic condition management plan could help you. This plan can assist with the costs of seeing some allied health professionals (e.g. physiotherapists and dietitians). Through this plan, Medicare can help cover the costs of some allied health visits each calendar year.

Can I use telehealth for my appointments?

Telehealth appointments by phone or video call can reduce how often you need to travel. The health professional you have an appointment with does not need to be in the same town, or even in the same state or territory as you.

Telehealth is now widely used for cancer follow-up appointments, especially for people in rural and regional areas.

Tips for telehealth appointments include:

- find a quiet, private place with a reliable phone or internet connection
- have a list of questions ready
- ask someone you trust to join you if it helps
- ask for a written summary of what was discussed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, connection to Country, family, community and culture is at the heart of healing, wellbeing and recovery after cancer.

Some hospitals and health services have Aboriginal health workers or liaison officers. They can support you, help you talk with your healthcare team, and make sure your cultural, family and community needs are respected. If your hospital or clinic doesn't have one, ask if they can arrange a phone or video call with an Aboriginal health worker who can support you.

You may find it helpful to talk about your cultural needs for your after-cancer care with your health team. This might include having family with you, needing time for cultural obligations, or asking for a different doctor if you don't feel safe or respected.

If you receive care through an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO), they can work alongside your hospital and specialist team to coordinate your ongoing care, support your wellbeing and help you access local services.

If there is not an ACCHO near you, you can call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 and ask a qualified professional to connect you with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services or professionals who can support you by phone or telehealth.

How to cope with late and ongoing side effects

Cancer treatments can cause side effects. While some go away shortly after treatment ends, others can continue for a long time. Some may appear months or years later - these are called late effects. Everyone's experience is different, and side effects may come and go. It can take time to work out what helps and what support you need.

If you live in a rural or regional area, you may have fewer local health professionals to help you manage side effects, so you might have to travel for care. Your GP may be able to help you manage many of these side effects – if not, they can connect you with other health professionals.

Cancer Council information resources

Cancer Council has free resources with information on how to manage many side effects from cancer or treatment. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to order printed copies of our booklets and fact sheets, or you can download them from cancerconnect.org.au. This table lists our resources about particular side effects. We also have our *Late Effects of Cancer Treatment* fact sheet and our *Living Well After Cancer* booklet.

Side effect	What it is	Cancer Council resource
fatigue	feeling very tired, even after rest	▸ *Understanding Fatigue and Cancer*
brain fog	trouble concentrating or remembering things	▸ *Understanding Changes in Thinking and Memory*
peripheral neuropathy	tingling, numbness or pain in the hands or feet	▸ *Understanding Peripheral Neuropathy*
lymphoedema	swelling caused by a build-up of fluid	▸ *Understanding Lymphoedema*
pain	new or ongoing pain	▸ *Understanding Cancer Pain*
eating changes	discomfort eating or drinking; problems with taste and smell	▸ *Understanding Mouth Health and Cancer Treatment; Understanding Taste and Smell Changes*
mood changes	feeling low, anxious, or not like yourself	▸ *Emotions and Cancer*
fertility issues	temporary or permanent infertility (unable to conceive a child)	▸ *Fertility and Cancer*

- Always tell your doctor or nurse if you have new or worsening symptoms.
- Getting help early can stop side effects from getting worse.

Impact on sex and intimacy

Some cancer treatments can make it harder to have sex or enjoy it. Many treatments can also lower your interest in being intimate (libido) or change how you feel about your body. These changes can be short term or long lasting, and they can be upsetting or hard to manage.

Some people worry that they will never be able to enjoy sex again, but most people can have a fulfilling sex life after cancer. It's important to allow yourself time to adapt to any changes.

If you are worried about changes to how you feel about yourself, your relationship or sexual functioning, you may find talking to a psychologist or counsellor helpful. You can also talk to your GP.

▸ See our *Sex, Intimacy and Cancer* booklet and listen to the "Sex and Cancer" episode of our podcast series, *The Thing About Cancer*.

Fear of cancer coming back

It is common to feel anxious or frightened about the cancer coming back (recurrence). Most cancer survivors are likely to experience this fear to some degree, and it may come and go for many years. You can learn ways to manage this fear (see next page).

Living in a rural or regional area can make these feelings stronger. You may be far from your specialist and feel like you have fewer people nearby who understand what you've been through. You may also worry about having to travel to see doctors for treatment again.

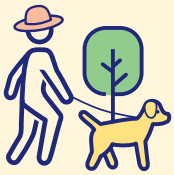
"Once treatment was finished, it was quite daunting. I was fearful that the cancer would come back elsewhere. Eight years later, it hasn't come back, which is fantastic." PETE

Ways to manage fear and worry



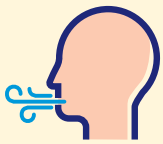
Get clear information

Ask your treatment team what symptoms to watch for and what is normal. If you like, you can also ask about your risk of cancer coming back. Understanding what to expect can help reduce worry.



Focus on what you can control

You can't control whether cancer comes back, but you can take steps that help your health and wellbeing. Attend follow-up appointments and make healthy lifestyle changes where you can (see page 7).



Notice stress early

Recognise when worry is affecting you (e.g. trouble sleeping, racing thoughts or a tight chest). Try gentle ways to calm your body, such as slow breathing, stretching or a short walk.



Talk it through

If fear feels overwhelming, a counsellor or psychologist can help. They can teach practical ways to manage worry and anxious thoughts. Ask your GP for a referral, including for telehealth appointments if there's no-one nearby.



Connect with others

Joining a local or online support group can help you feel less alone and learn how other people who have had similar experiences cope with their fears and anxieties. See *Finding emotional support* (right) for more information.



Try relaxation techniques

Meditation, gentle yoga or breathing exercises can help reduce stress. Listen to Cancer Council's *Finding Calm During Cancer* podcast series for relaxation and meditation exercises.

"It helps to focus on what is happening now, what is actually known – not all the possibilities. One step at a time." JANE

Finding emotional support

In some rural and regional areas, you won't have access to face-to-face emotional support. Here are some other options:

- Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to talk to one of our qualified professionals.
- Join the Cancer Council Online Community at cancercouncil.com.au/OC to connect with other people affected by cancer, including others in rural and regional areas.
- Access telehealth counselling or psychology – ask your GP for a referral to see a counsellor or psychologist by phone or video.
- If you need immediate support at any time of day or night, call Lifeline on 13 11 14. In an emergency, call Triple Zero (000).

Work and financial support

Cancer can affect your income and increase your costs. If you live in a rural or regional area, you may have needed to travel for treatment, take time away from work, or pay people to help run your farm or business. Financial stress is common, and support is available. Options include:

The Rural Financial Counselling Service Network – This service offers free financial counselling to farmers, fishers, foresters and small rural business owners. Call 1300 771 741.

Farm Household Allowance – This service can provide income support for farming families experiencing hardship. To find out more, contact the Farmer Assistance Hotline on 132 316 or visit servicesaustralia.gov.au.

The National Debt Helpline – A free service that helps people who are struggling with debt or paying bills. It can connect you with professional financial counsellors. Call 1800 007 007 or visit ndh.org.au.

Help with transport and accommodation

You may need to travel for follow-up appointments or to see other health professionals after cancer treatment ends. Every Australian state and territory has a patient travel assistance scheme (see next page) that may help with transport and accommodation costs.

Travel and accommodation schemes

State/ Territory	Scheme	Contact
NSW	Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS)	1800 478 227 iptaas.health.nsw.gov.au
NT	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	nt.gov.au (search patient assisted travel)
Queensland	Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme (PTSS)	13 43 25 84 qld.gov.au/health/services/travel/subsidies
SA	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	1300 341 684 sahealth.sa.gov.au (search PATS)
Tasmania	Patient Travel Assistance Scheme	health.tas.gov.au (search PTAS)
Victoria	Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS)	1300 737 073 health.vic.gov.au (search vptas)
WA	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	wacountry.health.wa.gov.au (search PATS)



Cancer Council can help you find transport and accommodation support. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for help finding the scheme in your area.

Going back to work

Returning to work can be hard, especially if you have side effects or are having ongoing maintenance treatment. If you work casually, seasonally or for yourself, the financial impact can be immediate and you may feel greater pressure to return to work. Talk to your GP about what you can manage.

If you took time off work for treatment and are returning to an existing job, talk to your employer about a return-to-work plan.

▸ See our *Cancer, Work and You* booklet.

What if I can no longer work?

If cancer or treatment means you can't return to your previous work – whether that's paid employment, running a farm or business, or contract work – there may be options.

Talk to your GP about rehabilitation or retraining programs that could help you move to different work. If you're permanently unable to work, you may be able to access your superannuation early, or claim on income protection or total and permanent disability insurance if you have it.

Contact Services Australia on 132 717 to find out about payments like the Disability Support Pension. You can also call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to talk through your situation and discuss your options.

Looking after yourself

It's important to maintain your wellbeing after cancer treatment. Coming up with a plan for how to look after yourself can help you feel better and regain a sense of control.

Everyone's recovery from cancer is different, and small changes over time can make a real difference. Research shows that healthy lifestyle habits (see next page) can support your recovery and may lower the risk of cancer coming back.

Some people who have had cancer may be at an increased risk of other health problems (e.g. heart disease, osteoporosis or stroke. Lifestyle changes recommended for cancer prevention can also help reduce your risk of developing other health problems.

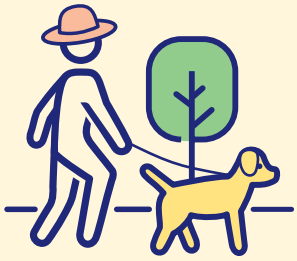
▸ See our *Understanding Heart Health and Cancer* fact sheet

"I decided to focus on one change at a time. I started by doing 100 steps in the backyard until I gradually built up to a 30-minute walk 5 days a week and strength training on 2 days. It took me almost 6 months to get there, but it was really satisfying to feel in control of my wellbeing." BETH

Living well

Taking care of your health and wellbeing after cancer can not only improve how you feel, it may also help you manage any side effects and also can lower the risk of some cancers coming back.

Move more



Being physically active has many benefits for people after cancer treatment. It can help you feel stronger, improve your mood and sleep, and may lower the risk of some cancers coming back. The Australian Government's guidelines recommend:

- light activity – several hours a day (e.g. walking around the house, grocery shopping)
- moderate activity – 30 minutes most days (e.g. brisk walking, cycling)
- balance and coordination – 3 times a week (e.g. tai chi, dancing)
- muscle strengthening – 2 times a week (e.g. lifting weights, squats).

It's important to talk to your doctor about what exercise is safe for you, then start slowly and build up your activity gradually.

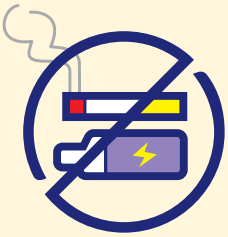
▸ See our *Exercise for People Living with Cancer* booklet.

Be a healthy body weight



Staying at a healthy weight can help reduce the risk of some cancers coming back and improve your overall health. If you've gained or lost weight during treatment, talk to your GP or a dietitian. Many dietitians offer telehealth appointments. They can provide advice on eating well, managing changes to your appetite or diet, and maintaining a healthy weight.

Quit smoking



Quitting smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your health. It can improve your recovery and lower the risk of some cancers coming back.

It's not always easy, but free support is available. Call Quitline on 13 7848 for advice. You can also talk to your GP about nicotine replacement or medicines to help you quit.

Vaping is not a safe alternative to smoking.

Limit alcohol



Drinking alcohol increases the risk of some cancers. Even small amounts can increase the risk.

If you choose to drink, try to follow the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines and have no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks in one day.

Tips to reduce how much alcohol you have include:

- having alcohol-free days each week
- swapping alcoholic drinks for sparkling water
- having alcohol-free beers or wines.

Eat well



Eating a variety of healthy foods helps your body recover and can lower the risk of cancer coming back. Try to:

- eat plenty of vegetables, fruit, wholegrains and legumes
- choose lean meat, fish, chicken or plant-based protein
- limit red meat and avoid processed meats like ham and salami
- drink plenty of water.

If you need help with eating well, ask your GP for a referral to a dietitian.

▸ See our *Nutrition for People Living with Cancer* booklet.

Be SunSmart



Skin cancer is the most common cancer in Australia and one of the most preventable. Most skin cancers are caused by exposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

To protect yourself when the UV is 3 or above:

- slip on sun-safe clothing
- slap on a broad-brimmed hat
- slop on SPF 50+ sunscreen
- slide on wraparound sunglasses
- seek shade.

Check daily sun protection times on the free SunSmart app or bom.gov.au. Ask your doctor how often you need a skin check.

Living with advanced cancer

Some people will be living with cancer that cannot be cured but can still be treated (advanced or metastatic cancer). Treatment has improved a lot in recent years, and many people with advanced cancer can live a good quality of life for years.

Living outside of major towns and cities can sometimes add extra challenges. You may need to travel longer distances for ongoing treatment, and there may be less local support to access between appointments. Staying connected to your GP is important, as they are usually your main health professional close to home.

▸ See our *Living with Advanced Cancer* booklet.

Questions to ask your health professionals

- What ongoing or late side effects should I watch out for?
- How often will I need follow-up appointments, scans or tests? Where will these be done?
- Which appointments can be done by telehealth?
- Who do I contact if I have symptoms or concerns between appointments?
- What support services are available for me and my family in my area?
- Can you refer me to allied health professionals in my area?
- How do I access a chronic condition management plan?
- Can I speak with an Aboriginal health worker?

Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 or visit the website for more information about cancer and health care. Qualified professionals can listen to your concerns, put you in touch with local services and send you free copies of our booklets. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Connect	**cancerconnect.org.au**
ACT	**actcancer.org**
NSW	**cancercouncil.com.au**
NT	**cancer.org.au/nt**
QLD	**cancerqld.org.au**
SA	**cancersa.org.au**
TAS	**cancer.org.au/tas**
VIC	**cancervic.org.au**
WA	**cancerwa.asn.au**
Australia	**cancer.org.au**

Other useful contacts

Farmer Assistance Hotline	**132 316**
National Rural Health Alliance	**ruralhealth.org.au**
Rural Financial Counselling Service Network	**1300 771 741** **rfcsnetwork.com.au**
Services Australia (Centrelink)	**132 850** **servicesaustralia.gov.au**

Acknowledgements

This fact sheet has been reviewed by: Dr Florian Honeyball, Medical Oncologist, Western Cancer Centre. NSW; Professor Bogda Koczwara AM, Director, Australian Research Centre for Cancer Survivorship, (a UNSW partnership with Cancer Council NSW); Morgan Atkinson, Senior Manager, SA/NT Youth Cancer Service, Royal Adelaide Hospital, SA; John Clements, Consumer; Robyn Fanning, Specialist, Supportive Care & Accommodation, Townsville, Cancer Council Queensland, QLD; Kirsty Glanville, Wiradjuri woman and Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Equity, Cancer Council Australia; Sandy Hutchison, Clinical Psychologist, Cancer Wellbeing Centre, Indooroopilly, QLD; Dr Wei-Sen Lam, Cancer Service Lead, Department of Health, Medical Oncologist, Esperance Hospital and Head of Service, Medical Oncology, Fiona Stanley Hospital, WA; Ian Martin, Consumer; Louise Moodie, Director, Dietetics, Mackay Hospital and Health Service, QLD; Dr Simone Reeves, Radiation Oncologist, Ballarat-Austin Radiation Oncology Centre (BAROC), VIC; Deb Roffe, 13 11 20 Consultant, SA; Dr Hannah Rothermel, General Practitioner, Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation, Maclean Clinic, NSW; Dr Sean Stevens OAM, General Practitioner and Co-Owner, Grove Medical, WA; Carissa Stone, Nurse Consultant, McGrath Foundation, Adelaide, SA; Victoria Turner, Consumer; Shirley Witko, Senior Social Worker, Kimberley Cancer Services, WA Country Health Service, WA.

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.

This fact sheet is funded through the generosity of the people of Australia. To support Cancer Council, call 13 11 20 or visit cancerconnect.org.au.

Cancer Council 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.

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