Cancer Council

PRACTICAL SUPPORT fact sheet

Just Finished Treatment

A guide for people in the first few months after treatment for cancer

It can take time to adjust to life after cancer. After treatment, you may worry about not seeing your cancer treatment team as often. You might have physical, emotional and practical concerns. This fact sheet explains what to expect after treatment, who will help care for your health, and where to find support.

What happens now?

After your final treatment appointment, you might be eager to go back to your pre-cancer activities. You might also be wondering what happens now. Follow-up appointments may be scheduled with your cancer specialist, but these might not be for weeks or months.

Before the final treatment session, it may be helpful to talk to your cancer care team about a plan that sets out what happens next and who you can call for support and advice (see next page).

It may feel scary to see your cancer care team less regularly. Some people miss the familiarity and security of the treatment centre. This is normal and common. If you need support or have any concerns between appointments, see your general practitioner (GP) or call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20.

"The thing that I found difficult at the end of treatment was I left the mothership, the hospital. It becomes like this space station that you go to all the time and all your crew are there and suddenly you're at home … How can you manage that?" JULIE

Follow-up care

After treatment, you may have check-ups every 3-6 months for several years. These appointments are usually with your cancer specialist or your GP. They monitor your health and watch for any signs that the cancer might return (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.

After treatment, your GP can become a central member of your healthcare team. They 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.

What is survivorship care?

After you finish cancer treatment, you will still have regular health care and support. This can help you adjust to life after cancer, stay well and manage any ongoing side effects. This is sometimes called survivorship care.

Your cancer care team can develop a plan for after treatment. This plan could list follow-up appointments and screening tests, symptoms to watch out for and explain long-term side effects. A summary of your treatment will usually be sent to your GP. You can ask for a copy of this summary.

You can develop your own plan after treatment and review it with your treatment team or GP. The Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre provides a template you can download and fill out. To start one, visit mycareplan.org.au.

Which other health professionals may I see?

Different health professionals can support your wellbeing and help you adjust to daily life after treatment. Many are known as allied health professionals. Allied health professionals who may help after cancer include:

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

Ask your GP whether a chronic condition management plan (GPCCMP) could help you. This plan can help with the costs of seeing some health professionals. Through a GPCCMP, Medicare can help cover the costs of some allied health visits.

"After my treatment, a psychologist explained that it's common to feel like you've had the rug pulled out from underneath you. Knowing that, and how normal it is, helped tremendously." DAVID

Finding your "new normal"

Finishing treatment doesn't mean life goes back to how it was before cancer. Many people find a "new normal" over time. This may not happen straightaway, and that's okay. Some ways to help you find your new normal are listed below.

Keep a journal

Think about what matters most to you. You may find it helps to write down how you're feeling in a journal or to ask yourself what makes you feel fulfilled.

Prioritise self-care

Make time each day to do something you find relaxing or enjoyable. This could be reading, listening to music, swimming, spending time in nature or taking a bath.

Look after yourself

It may take time to get used to changes in your body. Do things at your own pace and rest between activities. Remember, your body is still healing. If you are worried about going out, ask someone to go with you.

Take control

Look at ways you can manage your own wellness. Ask your GP how they can support your nutrition and movement, perhaps by referring you to a dietitian, physiotherapist or an exercise physiologist.

Clear your mind

Complementary therapies, such as relaxation, mindful meditation, yoga and massage, may increase your sense of control, decrease stress and anxiety, and improve mood.

Talk about your emotions

Share any worries with family and friends, your GP, a psychologist or counsellor. You can also call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20.

Seek support

Connecting with other cancer survivors may help you understand how you are feeling. Join a support group, attend a survivorship program, watch survivorship videos or read stories from other survivors (see page 6 for websites).

How you might feel

It's normal to have mixed feelings when treatment ends. You might feel:

- relief that the treatment is over and that you can now focus on things you enjoy doing
- hopeful about the future
- isolated and nervous, like you're losing a safety net
- lonely if your relationships have changed, or people don't understand what you've been through
- fear and anxiety around follow-up appointments, scans and tests
- worry that the cancer is still there or will come back (see opposite)
- anger and frustration at your cancer experience
- discouraged that you can't do everything you were once able to do.

It is common to feel low or depressed after treatment ends. You may feel like your life is different from before cancer. Some people wonder if they will be able to work again and whether their family will cope if they can't earn enough money. Sometimes you may feel down for no particular reason.

Noticing how you are feeling may help you understand your feelings better. Remembering ways you have coped with difficult situations before may give you some strategies to cope with your emotions.

Fear of the cancer coming back

It is common to worry about the cancer coming back. This is called fear of recurrence. Most people are likely to experience this fear to some degree.

Some people describe it as a dark cloud or a shadow over their life. It usually fades over time, but can return at certain times, such as:

- before follow-up appointments, tests and scans
- when you are feeling unwell or have symptoms similar to those when you were first diagnosed
- hearing media reports about cancer, new treatments and celebrities with cancer
- seeing cancer-related fundraising campaigns or advertisements
- seeing cancer-related social media content
- noticing different or new symptoms or general aches and pains.

Talk about your fear with someone you trust or your GP. It may help to see a psychologist or counsellor as well. Your GP can refer you to one.

Some people feel anxious about returning to activities they used to do before cancer, or they worry about being around people in case they catch an infection. Talk to your cancer care team or your GP about what is safe and manageable for you.

When to seek help about your feelings

It is natural to have days when you feel sad or worried. Depression is more than feeling down for a few days. Talk to your doctor if you:

- don't want to do things you used to enjoy
- feel very sad and low most of the day, nearly every day
- begin to rely on alcohol or drugs
- worry that you might hurt someone
- think about self-harm or taking your own life.

Anxiety and depression are quite common among people who have had cancer, but there is no need to face this experience alone. Talk to your cancer care team or GP about whether counselling or medication – even for a short time – may help. Beyond Blue offers support on 1300 22 4636 or at beyondblue.org.au. For 24-hour crisis support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au. You can also call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to talk to a qualified professional.

► See our booklet *Emotions and Cancer* for more information and support.

Managing side effects of treatment

Some treatment side effects go away quickly, while others can take months or even years to improve. Some may be permanent. Most side effects can be managed with support from your healthcare team. Your body will recover in its own way, so don't worry if your recovery doesn't match up with that of other people. This table lists our resources on particular side effects. You may also find it helpful to read our *Late Effects of Cancer Treatment* fact sheet or 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 after treatment	▸ *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 emotionally different	▸ *Emotions and Cancer*
fertility issues	temporary or permanent infertility (unable to conceive a child)	▸ *Fertility and Cancer*

Sex and intimacy

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

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 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.*

Returning to work

Having a job can be important for income, routine, self-esteem and feeling connected. 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 for more information about working with or after cancer or call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20.

If you notice new symptoms

If you notice new or concerning symptoms, see your doctor. For some people, cancer does return and you will need to make further decisions about treatment. It's also possible to develop a second cancer that is different from the first cancer. That's why it's important to keep up to date with cancer screenings and attend follow-up appointments.

Living well

Taking care of your health can improve how you feel and may 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. gardening, tai chi, dancing)
- muscle strengthening – 2 times a week (e.g. lifting weights, squats, lunges).

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

Maintain 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. Small changes can help – like eating more vegetables, choosing wholegrain foods, drinking water instead of soft drink, and being more active.

Eat well

Eating a variety of healthy foods helps your body recover and may lower the risk of some cancers 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.

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 support is available. Call Quitline on 13 7848 for advice or visit quit.org.au.
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 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 can include:

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

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 wrap-around 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.

Starting a new job

If you're starting a new job after treatment, you don't have to tell a potential employer that you've had cancer unless it affects your ability to do the job. You should not be treated unfairly in the workplace because of your cancer diagnosis. If you are unable to return to your previous position, consider attending a rehabilitation or retraining program to prepare for another job. Cancer Council may be able to refer you to a service or support network. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to find out more.

Questions to ask your health professionals

This checklist may be helpful when thinking about questions to ask.

- When is my next follow-up appointment?
- Who will I see for my care?
- How likely is it that my cancer will come back?
- If the cancer returns, how will I know?
- How long will it be before I feel better?
- When can I resume activities I enjoyed before my diagnosis?
- Am I at risk of developing late effects? What might these be?
- What can I do to prevent late effects?
- Do I need any tests to monitor this?
- How long will I receive follow-up care for?
- What symptoms/problems should I watch out for? Who should I call when I experience these?
- What vaccines should I have?
- Is there anything I can do to improve my health?

Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for more for information and support. Qualified professionals can listen to your concerns, connect you with local services, and send you free copies of our booklets. You can also visit the Cancer Connect website and 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 websites

Cancer Australia	**canceraustralia.gov.au**
Cancer Council Online Community	**cancercouncil.com.au/OC**
Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre	**petermac.org/cancersurvivorship**
The Thing About Cancer podcasts	**cancercouncil.com.au/podcasts**

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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 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.

Cancer Council

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