CANCER MIND CARE

Date: Nov 6 2026

Depression

Watch Video

Topics covered on this page

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What is depression?

Cancer and its treatment can affect your mood and the way you feel about yourself. Feelings of sadness, shock and grief are normal responses to the diagnosis and treatment of cancer and will be experienced by most people with cancer at different times. You may adjust to these changes in your own time and at your own pace.

Depression however is more than just a low or blue mood. It is a serious illness that affects a person's quality of life, relationships, thinking and physical health.

People who experience both depression and cancer often feel distressed, tend to have trouble completing everyday tasks and may find it difficult to follow medical advice.

It is often difficult to diagnose depression in people with cancer because the physical symptoms of

depression can overlap with cancer symptoms and the side effects of cancer treatment. It is important when speaking to your doctor to also describe and talk about what you are thinking and feeling.

What are some of the psychological and physical symptoms of depression?

- Ongoing sadness or low mood for most of the day
- Feeling close to tears or experiencing intrusive or continual crying
- Feeling 'numb' or not feeling anything much at all
- Feelings of helplessness, or hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Difficulties concentrating, remembering and making decisions
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most activities that you used to enjoy
- Unintentional weight loss or weight gain
- Loss of energy or fatigue
- Loss of sexual interest
- Difficulty going to sleep, early waking, sleeping too much, or lying awake for hours
- Feeling restless, irritable or agitated
- Being slowed down enough for others to notice
- Thoughts of self-harm, thoughts that the life you have is not worth living or wishing you were dead

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What situations and events increase your risk of developing depression?

Physical

- Loss of physical abilities
- Poorly controlled pain
- Recurrence of cancer
- Poor cancer prognosis
- Advanced stage of cancer
- Additional medical problems

Emotional and social risk factors

- Lack of family / friend / carer support
- Unemployment
- Past history of depression
- Family history of depression or suicide
- Previous suicide attempts
- Drug or alcohol abuse

How can you manage depression?

There are a range of ways depression can be managed:

- Self-management strategies (e.g. lifestyle changes and self-help strategies)
- Psychological therapies (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy)
- Medical management (e.g. medications)

If you feel depressed what can you do?

Seek medical information

It is important that you seek information about your cancer from your treating team. Inform them of any changes in your level of pain or other physical symptoms. Your treating team may help you to better understand your cancer. They may be able to assist you with better symptom management which in turn may improve your mood.

Monitor your self-talk

Depression may be affected by how we think, which in turn affects how we feel and behave.

People who are depressed often have a number of unhelpful thinking patterns about themselves, their relationships and their situation. It may be helpful to keep a journal of your thoughts and identify what could be a trigger to these thoughts. Understanding your thinking patterns can help change the way you experience your situation.

Make plans for the future

Planning can be helpful. You may feel uncertain about planning too far in advance. Try to make a list of what you will do tomorrow and each day of the following week. Each day mark off your list of achievements. Reschedule the tasks you have not completed for the next day. Keeping a list of tasks will help you concentrate your thoughts beyond what you are experiencing in this minute and help you focus on other thoughts.

Try to engage in pleasant activities every day

Do something nice for yourself every day such as spending time reading, having a special treat, visiting a local café for a hot drink, walking to a local park, listening to music, speaking to a friend, day -dreaming of a past holiday or any other activities that you enjoy.

Learn relaxation skills

Learning how to relax can help people manage low mood and treatment related symptoms (such as pain).

There are many different relaxation techniques. Two that you might want to try include:

Slow Breathing

- Slow breathing is a very effective way to become more relaxed.
- Simply breathe in slowly and deeply, all the way to your belly. Then let your breath out in a slow and controlled manner. Some people like breathing in through their nose, and out through their mouth. Do whatever is most comfortable for you.
- You can practice this regularly (10-15 minutes each day) to help with general relaxation and wellbeing.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This relaxation involves noticing tension in the muscles of your body, and relaxing this tension in each part of your body, one part at a time. Start with your head, and work 'progressively' through your arms, body, legs and feet. Repeat this as many times as needed.

Consider attending a relaxation or meditation class or listening to an audio recording of a guided relaxation exercise

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Improving your general health by engaging in regular exercise such as a short walk around the block or to the local cafe, having a well-balanced diet, maintaining good quality sleep and reducing caffeine/alcohol use can all assist in managing depression.

Spend time with friends, loved ones or find a support group

Seek social support and speak about how you are feeling. Support can assist people in coping with difficult situations and helps them feel less isolated.

Seeking help from a mental health professional

If your depression symptoms persist for a long time (more than 2 weeks), it can be helpful to speak to someone professional about how you are feeling. Explore your options listed at the bottom of this page.

Further information and support services

Further information

Beyond Blue - Depression information
Visit Website

Black Dog Institute - Understanding depression information
Visit Website

Finding a mental health professional

You can begin by speaking to your General Practitioner (GP). GPs can discuss your emotional concerns with you and can link you to supports in the local community, such as a psychologist or social worker.

You can also speak to your cancer clinician. Most cancer services have a range of psychological support options including psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and psychiatrists. If

this isn't available at your local health service, ask them what support is available in the local community.

You can find a local Psychologist with a referral or a mental health care plan from your GP.

Search for a local Psychologist
Visit Website

Search for a local Psychiatrist
Visit Website

Health Direct

Health Direct provides information about what a mental health care plan is and how you can work with your GP to access a mental health care plan.

Visit Website

Online self-help programs and smartphone apps

Moodgym

Moodgym is like an interactive self-help book which helps you to learn and practise skills which can help to prevent and manage symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Visit Website

This Way Up online depression course

This Way Up is a trusted Australian provider of evidence-based, internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (iCBT) programs.

Visit Website

Mental Health Online - Depression Program

Mental Health Online provides comprehensive and effective online services and programs free of charge.

Visit Website

Black Dog Institute iBobbly app

A social and emotional wellbeing self-help app for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over.

Visit Website

Relaxation and mindfulness

Cancer Council NSW – Finding calm during cancer

Meditation and relaxation practices

Visit Website

Headspace

Meditation and mindfulness app

Visit Website

Smiling Mind

Web and app-based meditation program

Visit Website

Cancer support services

Cancer Council Victoria

A non-profit cancer charity organisation involved in cancer research, patient support, cancer prevention and advocacy.

Call 13 11 20 to speak with a cancer nurse
Visit Website
Support Groups
Cancer Connect peer support

Online Community

WeCan

A supportive care website

Visit Website

Telephone support services

Beyond Blue

All calls are with a trained mental health professional, and completely confidential. They will only ask you your first name and you can remain completely anonymous.

Phone: 1300 224 636
Visit Website

Lifeline

Lifeline provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis have access to 24-hour crisis support by trained professional

Phone: 13 11 14
Visit Website

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