CANCER MIND CARE

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Fear of Recurrence

Watch Video

Topics covered on this page

- What is fear of cancer recurrence?
- If you are worried, what can you do?
- Further information and support services

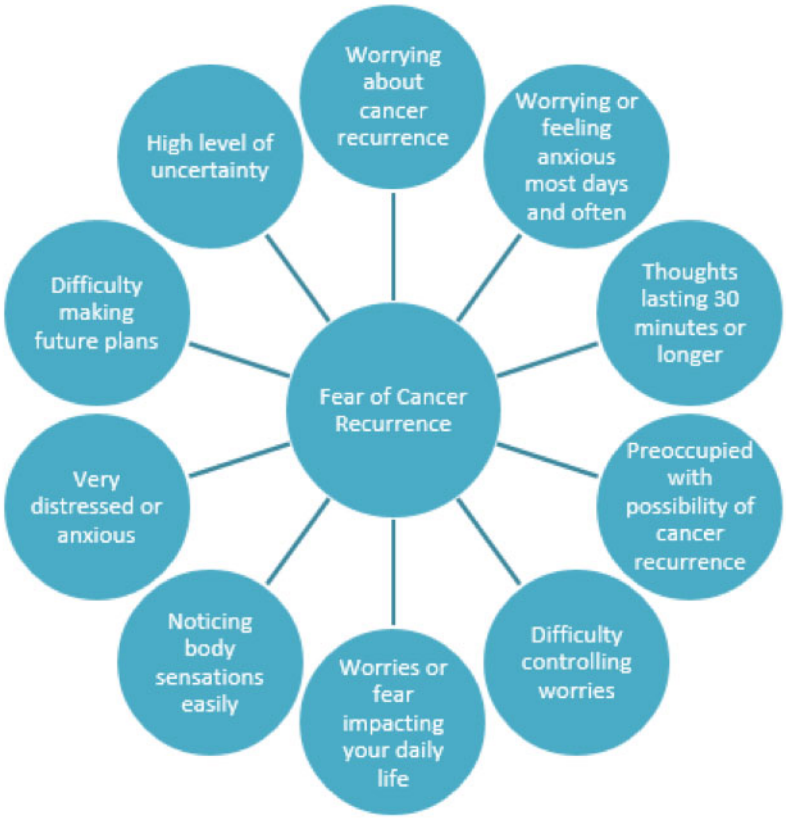
What is fear of cancer recurrence?

Fear of cancer recurrence is the fear or worry that cancer could return or spread in the same place or any other part of the body.

Fear of cancer recurrence affects most people after finishing cancer treatment.

It is normal and understandable to be worried about your cancer coming back or progressing.

The diagram below shows common features of fear of cancer recurrence.



Common fears about cancer returning or progressing

- Further treatment
- Further disability, pain or suffering
- Impact on quality of life
- Being unable to fulfil obligations
- Impact of a recurrence on loved ones
- Loss and grief about not being able to live out lifetime goals
- The possibility of death and the process of dying

Events or experiences which may increase your fears

- Follow-up appointments or scans
- Physical symptoms or changes
- Anniversaries of major cancer events such as diagnosis
- Hearing about cancer stories in the news, celebrities, or other people's cancer experience
- Seeing others who have cancer and having treatment when you go for appointments

If your fear of cancer recurrence is high, you may have intrusive thoughts or images about the cancer returning or progressing.

- You may be very alert and looking out for physical symptoms
- You might notice aches, pains and changes in how you feel or look
- You might check physical symptoms excessively or avoid symptom monitoring
- You might notice a lot of anxiety about tests, scans, treatment, or medical appointments

These concerns may impact daily life and cause a lot of distress or anxiety for people with high levels of fear of cancer recurrence.

If you are worried about cancer returning or progressing, what can you do?

Acknowledge your fears

You might write them down or tell them to a friend or family member. Remind yourself that it's very normal and understandable to be worried about your cancer coming back or progressing.

Get to know your triggers

Be aware of times when your fear will be higher and plan how you will manage your fears at that time. For example, when you have an upcoming scan, you might write your worries down, do things that are important to you, practice your relaxation, and make sure you eat and sleep well.

Ask questions

Write a list of questions for your cancer team.

Learn the symptoms

Ask your doctors what symptoms you need to watch out for, how to check symptoms (if applicable),

and how/when to respond to new symptoms. Try to keep to their guidelines, and remind yourself that not all physical symptoms are signs of cancer.

Do things that are important to you

Do things that are important to you, even if you are feeling fearful or worried.

Talk to someone you trust about your fears

People around you might not want to tell you they are also worried about the possibility of your cancer returning or progressing. Let them know how you're feeling and that you'd just like them to listen and hear your concerns.

Do regular relaxation

Do regular relaxation such as calming breathing, or mindfulness meditations. Try to do 5-15 minutes of relaxation each day and immediately when you are having thoughts of recurrence.

Keep a healthy lifestyle

Avoid foods or drinks that increase your anxiety such as caffeine or alcohol. Continue exercising as you usually do. Try to keep to healthy sleep habits.

Seek help from a mental health professional

It can be helpful to speak to a mental health professional about how you are feeling. Explore your options listed at the bottom of this page.

Further information and support services

Further information

Cancer Council - Living Well After Cancer booklet
Download Guide

Cancer Council NSW - Fear of the cancer returning information
Visit Website

Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre - Coping with Fear of your Cancer Coming Back fact sheet
Download Guide

Macmillan (UK) - Worrying about Cancer Coming Back booklet
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

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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Content is sourced from published research literature, grey literature sources (e.g. clinical guidelines) and opinions of clinical experts. It is not intended to reflect all of the available evidence and is not intended to be exhaustive.

The authors acknowledge that it is possible that other relevant guidelines or scientific findings may have been published since the development of the website.