

MAINTAINING HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Physical wellbeing

Exercise – before beginning to exercise it is important to make sure your body is ready. You need to think about the following things:

- Make sure symptoms such as pain and nausea are well managed.
- Check with your GP that it is OK, particularly if you have had recent surgery.
- Start slowly and be kind to yourself, building up your endurance gradually.
- Swimming, exercise bikes and seated exercises are useful if you have balance problems.
- Incidental exercise is also good (such as parking your car a block away from your destination, using stairs, doing housework).
- A physiotherapist can help you design a fitness program suited to your level of fitness and stage of treatment / illness.

Diet

- A well-balanced diet helps your body recover from treatment effects and maintain a healthy weight.
- Generally eating more fruit and vegetables, and drinking more water, is a good beginning. A dietitian can help you develop a healthy, balanced eating plan.
- It is OK to still enjoy yourself; a nice meal at a restaurant and drinking alcohol in moderation is fine.

Emotional wellbeing

- The emotional effects of cancer last long after the treatment has finished. These can be both good and bad.
- Often the diagnosis of cancer causes you to review your life and maybe change some of your priorities. This may have the biggest emotional impact after you have finished your treatment, perhaps because during treatment you focused on physically doing everything you could to get rid of the cancer. After treatment, your emotions often say, 'OK, now it's my turn. We have to think about what all this means.' This can be an overwhelming experience.
- You may find that you cannot stop thinking about the cancer. Your uncertainty may peak. You may question your place in the work, your family, your relationships or your job.
- You may also worry about any change in your body that you cannot explain. Once our brain has learnt that bad things can happen when you least expect them, it is very hard to 'unlearn' it. Thus, every ache and pain you feel triggers that 'it's back' response.
- It is very common to worry about aches and pains. It is important to set rules for how you will deal with them. For example: 'I have to make myself think about what might have caused the pain rather than assume it is cancer.' or 'I must have had an unexplained ache for at least five days before I go and see my GP.'
- If any of these concerns begin to overwhelm you and affect your ability to complete your daily activities, a counselor or psychologist can help you work through these things.

Social wellbeing

- Getting back into your social life can often be more of a challenge than you would expect. Just as you may reconsider your place in your family, you may also question your social relationships. You may also still feel fatigued and isolated.
- It is common for people you expected strong support from to disappoint you. It is also common to gain support from unexpected sources.
- It usually helps to reintroduce yourself to your social circle gradually. Maybe invite a few friends over that you have not seen for a while. Prepare for what you are going to tell them about what has happened and think about some other 'non-cancer' topics. This means you give them the information they need without the whole visit being about cancer. Be prepared to need a rest after these visits. It will take time to build up your stamina.

Spiritual wellbeing

- For some people spirituality and religion are the same thing and for others they are separate. It is important that you care for yourself in a way that makes sense to you. This may involve organized religion, either one you are familiar with or a venture into a new religion.
- For others it involves working on finding a place spiritually where they feel at peace and whole. This can be achieved in various ways; for example, through medication, gardening, prayer, fishing or being in nature.
- How you do it is not important, but you should make some spiritual time for yourself each day. Early in the morning is a good time as it is quiet and often easier to focus your mind on inner peace.

Extracted from: Adams, Catherine, 'Coping with Common Concerns' in Hodgkinson, Dr Katharine; Gilchrist, Dr Jemma (eds), *Psychosocial Care of Cancer Patients: A Health Professional's Guide to What to Say and Do*, Ausmed Publications (2008, Melbourne), 81, 82.

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