

Tip Sheet:

Coping with Anxiety During Cancer Treatment

What is anxiety?

- Anxiety means feeling worried, nervous, or afraid. Being anxious can be a normal reaction to stressful situations, and some amount of anxiety is common for people who are coping with a cancer diagnosis.
- However, anxiety sometimes can interfere with your day-to-day activities, decision making, and ability to follow your treatment.
- Anxiety can occur at different times during cancer treatment. It is often high shortly after diagnosis or with changes in treatment, and decreases over time. However, you are more likely to experience anxiety if you have struggled with it in the past. Anxiety that becomes intense and overwhelming is not something you should have to live with.

Common symptoms of anxiety

- Feeling tense, nervous, or worried much of the time
- Having trouble concentrating
- Getting easily annoyed or angry
- Wanting to avoid certain places or activities
- Feeling dizzy, shaky, and/or sweaty
- Having your heart pound or beat fast
- Having trouble breathing, or feeling tightness in your throat or chest
- Headaches or stomachaches
- Sleep problems

If you have some of these symptoms, tell your Dana-Farber care team.

What you can do

There are many ways to lower your anxiety and stress. Some approaches may work better or feel more comfortable than others, and you may want to try combining a few.

Manage your medical information

- Decide how much medical information you want. If it feels comfortable, ask your care team about your treatment options, expected response, side effects, and services available to help you. Some people feel less afraid when they know what to expect about their illness and treatment.
- If possible, bring a friend or family member to medical visits to help listen, ask questions, and take notes. With permission from your caregivers, you might audio record your conversations so you can listen again later.

Take care of yourself

- Try relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga. Or try other integrative therapies to ease your cancer symptoms, such as acupuncture, massage therapy, tai chi, or Reiki.
- Get regular exercise. Being physically active may help improve your mood and reduce anxiety. Talk with your care team about your exercise routine.
- Maintain a healthy diet.
- Get help with physical changes from your cancer and treatment (hair loss, scars, weight changes, etc.) that affect how you feel about yourself.
- Decide which tasks and activities are most important and say “no” to others that seem less important now.
- Ask for and accept help from family, friends, or coworkers with tasks such as shopping, cooking, and childcare.
- Build your sense of hope. For example, continue regular activities like reading, walking, or seeing friends, reflect on your spiritual beliefs, or think about the positive things in your life.

Consider counseling and other support

- It can be useful to talk with others about what’s on your mind so you’re not alone with your thoughts and worries.
- Consider talking with a mental health professional (counselor or therapist) about ways to manage your anxiety.
- Some people find it helpful to meet with other patients in a support group or to talk with friends, relatives, or a chaplain or other spiritual adviser.

Ask about medication

- You may benefit from taking a prescription medication if your anxiety feels overwhelming and/or is interfering with your daily life. Your cancer care team will recommend the most appropriate medication or refer you to a psychiatrist for help.
- Anti-anxiety medication is often combined with counseling (talk therapy).
- Tell your provider about any vitamins or herbal supplements you are taking, because some may not mix safely with anti-anxiety drugs.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Peer support

- Dana-Farber offers many support groups and can help find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call **617-632-3301**.



- One-to-One is a free telephone-based program that connects Dana-Farber patients and families with trained volunteers who have experienced cancer. Call **617-632-4020** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/onetoone**.
- SoulMates is a program that connects new breast cancer patients with survivors who faced a similar diagnosis. Call **617-632-6501** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/soulmates**.

Spiritual care

Chaplains from many faiths provide spiritual guidance and counseling. Our chapel, located on the second floor of the Yawkey Center, is also open for reflection and prayer. Call **617-632-5778**, email **DFCISpiritualCare@dfci.harvard.edu**, or visit **www.dana-farber.org/spirituality**.

Integrative therapies

The Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living offers individual sessions in acupuncture, massage, reflexology, and Reiki, and free group programs in exercise/movement, meditation, and music and art therapy. Visit **www.dana-farber.org/zakim**, email **zakim_center@dfci.harvard.edu**, or call **617-632-3322**.

Exercise consults and classes

Dana-Farber's exercise specialist supports cancer patients and survivors who want to improve their fitness. To learn more or set up a free consult, call **617-632-4523** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/exercise**.

Nutrition

Our registered dietitians help cancer patients and survivors make healthy choices around foods, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Call **617-632-3006** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/nutrition**.

Friends' Place

Friends' Place is a specialty store on the first floor of the Yawkey Center that offers hats, wigs, scarves, prostheses, and more to help patients address physical changes that can result from cancer treatment. Call **617-632-2211** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/friendsplace**.

Blum Patient and Family Resource Center

The Blum Center, on the first floor of the Yawkey Center, is a comfortable place to learn more about cancer and its treatment. Stop by, call **617-632-5570**, or visit **www.dana-farber.org/resourcecenter**.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.