

Tip Sheet:

Coping with Depression During Cancer Treatment

What is depression?

Depression is an illness that can cause people to feel sad, hopeless, and lose interest in activities they usually enjoy. After a cancer diagnosis, it is natural to be upset or worried about how your disease will affect your family, relationships, appearance, work, finances, and future. But if you have intense sadness, with some of the symptoms below, and it lasts for two weeks or more or is interfering with your daily life, you may have clinical depression. This is a common problem for people with cancer, but it is treatable.

Common symptoms of depression

- Feeling sad, hopeless, worthless
- Being moody and short-tempered
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Withdrawing from friends or family
- Feeling nervous or shaky
- Having sleep or eating problems
- Being very low-energy
- Having sexual problems, such as decreased desire
- Having trouble concentrating
- Thinking about hurting or killing yourself
- Feeling that life is not worth living

If you have some of these symptoms, tell your Dana-Farber care team. You might also tell a trusted friend or family member so they can support you in getting help. Depression is not something to be embarrassed or ashamed about.

If you are thinking about suicide (taking your own life), call 911 or go to your local emergency room immediately.

Who is at risk for depression?

You are more likely to experience depression if you:

- have had it in the past
- have close family members with depression
- have pain that is not well controlled
- are physically weak from cancer
- have high levels of anxiety and worry
- are facing cancer without support from family or friends
- have financial concerns
- are taking certain cancer medications that can contribute to depression

What you can do

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 depression.
- 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 depression 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.
- Prescription medications can improve depression and help brighten your mood. They often take 3 to 6 weeks to work.
- It may take more than one try to find the right medication, and patients should be closely monitored by their doctor when starting one.
- Anti-depression 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-depression drugs.

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. 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.
- Postpone important life decisions until you feel better.
- Don’t worry alone.

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 classes and consults

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.

