



[cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345

Anxiety

Everyone feels anxious at times. But certain types of **anxiety** can cause extreme distress and get in the way of daily life. If you have, or had, cancer you are at a greater risk of developing anxiety.

There are treatments available, and many things you can do on your own to cope.

- [What is anxiety?](#)
- [Symptoms of anxiety](#)
- [Anxiety and cancer](#)
- [Screening](#)
- [Treatments](#)
- [Tips for coping with anxiety](#)
- [Talking to your health care team](#)
- [What caregivers, friends, and family can do](#)
- [Find more support](#)

What is anxiety?

Anxiety comes in many forms. Common types include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD):** a constant feeling of worry that makes daily life difficult.
- **Social anxiety disorder:** a fear of social interactions. Social anxiety disorder is more than just being shy.
- **Panic disorder (panic attacks):** a sudden and overwhelming feeling of panic that often includes a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath, sweating, shaking, or nausea.

- **Cancer-related phobias:** intense fears related to cancer. This can include a fear of tests or scans (scanxiety), death anxiety, and a fear of [cancer recurrence](#)¹.

Symptoms of anxiety

It's important to recognize anxiety, so you can take steps to manage it or prevent it from getting worse. There are several symptoms to watch for.

- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control your worries
- Worrying too much about many different things
- Having trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid, as if something awful might happen

If you have or had cancer, you might also feel anxious about:

- Cancer treatment and possible side effects
- Not knowing what to expect (or knowing too much about what to expect)
- Your family, relationships, job, or responsibilities
- Your cancer getting worse or coming back (fear of recurrence)
- Your own mortality or death

Having one or more of these symptoms doesn't mean you have a problem with anxiety. Some people with anxiety can learn how to cope and manage on their own.

But if your symptoms make it hard to do your work, take care of daily tasks, or get along with other people, it might be time to get help. There are treatments available. These treatments can help you manage your anxiety, so it doesn't get in the way of you living your life.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support via phone or chat for people in distress, resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Includes information on finding your local crisis center.

Phone: 988

- Interpretation for more than 240 languages
- ASL Videophone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

Text: 988 (English and Spanish only)

Website: <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>²

To get immediate help, you can also go to the emergency department or call 911.

Anxiety and cancer

Anxiety is common. Many people have it at some point in their lives. But you are at greater risk of anxiety if you have, or had, cancer. Anxiety that continues untreated can lead to other health problems. It can also make your cancer treatment and recovery more difficult.

What happens if my anxiety is left untreated?

Anxiety that continues and isn't treated can lead to many other problems: a weakened immune system; digestive problems; worse treatment side effects; slower physical recovery; poorer quality of life; and decreased survival.

When does anxiety happen during cancer treatment?

Anxiety can come and go during your cancer journey. This is especially true for certain events and milestones, such as when you:

- Are first diagnosed
- Start a new cancer treatment
- Experience side effects
- Get tests or scans, or have to wait on results
- Discuss prognosis or treatment decisions
- Go to follow-up appointments
- Have any symptoms of illness (that may or may not be related to cancer)
- Finish treatment and move to survivorship care

It's completely normal for caregivers or family members to have anxiety at these times

as well. Many of the coping tips that work for people going through cancer can also work for caregivers who experience anxiety.

What else increases my risk of anxiety?

Some people with cancer have an even higher risk of anxiety. Things known to increase the risk of anxiety include:

- Living alone
- Younger age at diagnosis
- Advanced disease
- History of mental health treatment
- Other health conditions
- [Social isolation](#)³

Screening

Many experts recommend screening everyone with cancer for anxiety and depression.

If your health care team asks you about your anxiety, share how you're really feeling.

This will give them important information, so they can get you the support you need before your diagnosis.

treatments.

Psychotherapy (talk therapy)

There are many types of psychotherapy (talk therapy). The most common types used to treat anxiety include:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).** CBT helps you recognize and process your feelings. You'll learn relaxation techniques, coping strategies, and ways to manage negative thoughts.
- **Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT):** ACT is a sub-set of CBT. You'll use mindfulness practices to notice and acknowledge your negative thoughts without trying to change or get rid of them.
- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT):** IPT focuses on the connection between your anxiety and your relationships with others.
- **Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR):** EMDR therapy uses directed eye movements along with talk therapy to help your brain heal from past life experiences.

Learn more about [coping with distress](#)⁴.

Medicines

If your anxiety is affecting your everyday life, your health care team might suggest adding an antianxiety medicine. (These are also known as **anxiolytics**).

The most common types are **antidepressants** and **benzodiazepines**.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants can help with more than depression. They also help with anxiety, pain, and sleep problems. Antidepressants work by affecting the levels of certain chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin and norepinephrine.

Most take a few weeks to start working, so give them time. There are also several different types of antidepressants. Don't get discouraged if the first one doesn't work for you.

Learn more about [antidepressants](#)⁵.

Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines work much faster than antidepressants. They can be helpful if you are feeling overwhelmed, nervous about a procedure, or can't stop worrying. Benzodiazepines are controlled substances and can be habit-forming.

Talk to your health care team about the risks and benefits of any new medicine.

Other medicines used to treat anxiety

- Buspirone (Buspar) increases serotonin and dopamine.
- Hydroxyzine (Atarax, Vistaril) is an antihistamine that also increases serotonin.
- Certain beta blockers such as propranolol (Inderal) are used [off-label](#)⁶ for performance anxiety.

Tj 0bht tha0 0.2 0.62745 RG 0.75 w 418.15 522.16 m 460.83 5g.

- Hypnosis
- Inhaling lavender essential oil

After cancer treatment:

- Mindfulness-based activities
- Acupuncture
- Reflexology
- Yoga (for people with breast cancer)
- Tai chi or qigong (for people with breast cancer)

Learn more about [complementary therapies](#)⁷.

Mindfulness-based activities

Studies show that certain mindfulness-based activities can improve symptoms of anxiety.

Mindfulness is about noticing and being present with your thoughts, emotions, body, and the world around you.

Our minds distract us from the present moment all the time, so it's easy to get caught up in thoughts and worries about the past or future. Mindfulness can help you stay connected to the present moment.

Learn more about [practicing mindfulness and relaxation](#)⁸.

Tips for coping with anxiety

Reflect. Think about what helped you in the past during distressing situations. If

Find more support

[Cancer Survivors Network](#)

An online community where people with cancer, survivors, and caregivers can connect with others 24/7.

[Cancer Help](#) ¹⁰

Contact the ACS cancer helpline to get answers and information

[MHA - Mental Health America](#)

Find a counselor or mental health provider.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html
2. suicidepreventionlifeline.org/
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/social-isolation-loneliness.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/distress/managing-distress.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/off-label-drug-use.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/practice-mindfulness-and-relaxation.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/how-to-help-a-loved-one-in-distress.html
10. www.cancer.org/about-us/what-we-do/providing-support.html

References

Anderson BL, Lacchetti C, Ashing K, et al. Management of anxiety and depression in adult survivors of cancer: ASCO guideline update. *J Clin Oncol*. 2023. 41: 3426-3453. Accessed January 24, 2024. DOI:10.1200/JCO.23.00293

Borenstein J. Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against people with mental illness. American Psychiatric Association. August 2020. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>

Chen WC, Boreta L, Braunstein SE, et al. Association of mental health diagnosis with race and all-cause mortality after a cancer diagnosis: Large-scale analysis of electronic health record data. *Cancer*. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.33903>

National Comprehensive Cancer Network. Distress during cancer care. NCCN Guidelines for Patients. 2023. Accessed December 15, 2023.

National Comprehensive Cancer Network. Distress management. Version 1.2024. NCCN Guidelines. Updated October 2023. Accessed December 15, 2023. https://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/pdf/distress.pdf

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (OASH). Social cohesion. Healthy People 2030. 2021. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/social-cohesion>

Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community. US Department of Health and Human Services. May 2023. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Rivest J and Levenson J. Patients with cancer: clinical features, screening, and diagnosis of anxiety disorders. *UpToDate*. UpToDate Inc; 2024. Updated January 2023. Accessed January 8, 2024. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/patients-with-cancer-clinical-features-screening-and-diagnosis-of-anxiety-disorders>

Roy-Byrne PP. Management of psychiatric disorders in patients with cancer. *UpToDate*. UpToDate Inc; 2023. Updated September 2023. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/management-of-psychiatric-disorders-in-patients-with-cancer>

Saad AM, Gad MM, Al-Husseini MJ, AlKhayat MA, Rachid A, Alfaar AS and Hamoda H.

