



Adjusting to Life With Cancer

A diagnosis of cancer impacts many parts of your life. Whether you have just found out you have cancer, are getting treated or have finished treatment — you will likely feel both physical and emotional changes that can impact the way you feel and how you live. These changes may affect daily life, but there are ways to cope.

Dealing With a Cancer Diagnosis

When you learn you have cancer, you may feel like your life has been turned upside down. As a fire fighter, you might know other friends or coworkers that have faced a cancer diagnosis, but little can prepare you for receiving your own diagnosis. It can seem overwhelming at first, but knowing what to expect may help you feel more at ease.

Once the shock of learning you have cancer wears off, the process of making changes begins. You may have to rearrange things in your life as you start treatment. You may have to learn new ways of [talking to your loved ones](#) and your [healthcare team](#). And you probably have a lot of questions about dealing with all the new issues that cancer brings. The following tips can help.

Acknowledge Your Feelings

Just as cancer affects your physical health, it can bring up a wide range of feelings you're not used to. Having cancer can also make many feelings seem more intense. These feelings may change daily, hourly or even minute to minute. This is true whether you're currently in treatment, done with treatment, or the friend or family member of someone with cancer. These feelings are all normal. Learn how to recognize the wide range of emotions you could be experiencing, including:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Denial
- Anger
- Fear and worry
- Hope
- Sadness and depression
- Stress and anxiety

In addition to reactions noted above, being diagnosed with an occupational-related cancer can bring on a complex mix of emotions and questions. You may feel a sense of guilt, regret or betrayal that you developed cancer while doing your job to protect and serve your community.

It's important to know that cancer is not your fault. Whatever your reaction is, acknowledge these feelings and talk about them when you are ready.

Tell Your Friends and Family and Let Them Help

Talking about your cancer can help you deal with all of the new emotions you are feeling. Consider letting your family, friends and crew members know about your diagnosis. It may affect them as much as you.

The people in your life may also feel worried, angry or afraid. Once people learn of your cancer, some will ask you how they can help. Others will wonder what they can do for you but won't be sure how to ask you. What kind of help you need from family and friends will vary greatly depending on your level of functional impairment, the make-up of your family and your existing relationship with the person that wants to help. Here are some ways that family and friends can help during your cancer journey:

- Giving or arranging a ride to appointments or treatments
- Picking up medication
- Checking in with texts or phone calls
- Mowing your lawn or keeping up with exterior household maintenance
- Donating sick leave time
- Taking the kids out for a fun activity
- Delivering meals to the home
- Serving as the family Point of Contact (POC) that manages communication and logistical needs

Options for Getting Support

Beyond assistance with practical needs, you will need emotional/social support from others during this time. In addition to relying on family or friends, you might consider contacting your local peer team, your department chaplain or an in-person or virtual first responder support group.

Additionally, many cancer survivors benefit from receiving cancer-specific support from others who have been through and understand what you're facing. Some options include:

- **American Cancer Society 24/7 Cancer Helpline** (1-800-227-2345) ([cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org)):
Get connected to trained cancer information specialists who will answer questions about a cancer diagnosis and provide guidance and a compassionate ear.
- **Firefighter Cancer Support Network** (Visit firefightercancersupport.org/ or call (866) 994-FCSN (U.S.)/(438) 600-FCSN (Canada):
FCSN provides critical assistance, post-diagnosis resources and 1:1 mentorship from fire service members who are cancer survivors to career or volunteer firefighters that have been diagnosed with cancer.
- **American Cancer Society Cancer Survivors Network** (csn.cancer.org):
CSN provides a safe online connection where cancer patients and caregivers can find others with similar experiences. You can participate on discussion boards, join a chat room and build your own support network.
- **American Cancer Society Reach To Recovery** (reach.cancer.org)
Chat online or on the phone with a trained volunteer who has survived breast cancer and understands what you are going through.

Know When to Seek Professional Help

If you have feelings that overwhelm or concern you, or that go on for more than two weeks, talk to your healthcare team. You may wish or need to speak to a licensed mental health professional, such as a clinical social worker, counselor or psychologist. Symptoms that may indicate you need to see a mental health professional include:

- Feelings of sadness that don't go away
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, as if life has no meaning
- Risky or reckless behavior, as if it doesn't matter what happens to you
- A short temper or feeling moody
- A hard time thinking or concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions about day-to-day issues or your treatment
- No interest in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Sleep problems
- A racing heart
- Fatigue that doesn't go away

If you have thoughts about hurting or killing yourself at any time, contact a crisis hotline immediately and later notify your healthcare providers:

- 24/7 Firefighter & Family Crisis Hotline: (844) 525-FIRE (3473)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255
- Crisis Service Canada: (833) 456-4566 (or text: 45645)
 - Quebec residents only: (866) 277-3553

Tips for Coping

Throughout your cancer journey, there will be times when your anxiety or stress level will be higher, e.g., after receiving initial diagnosis; when a phase of treatment ends; when tests or scans are scheduled; or upon anniversary dates related to diagnosis, remission or recurrence. During these times, it's important to have a plan for coping, self-care and accessing support. Follow these tips to help you cope and learn more coping skills in our [checklist for patients](#).

DO

- Ask for and accept help from others, including both informal or formal help.
- Talk about your feelings, no matter what they are.
- Stay active and eat balanced meals.
- Treat yourself to things you enjoy, like a hot bath, a nap or your favorite foods.
- Go to a movie, out to dinner or to a game.
- Get help with everyday jobs like cooking and cleaning.
- Practice meditation, mindfulness and deep breathing.

DON'T

- Try to do it all yourself.
- Try to force yourself to be happy.
- Try to do too much in one day.
- Give up healthy habits.

Adjusting to a “New Normal”

People who have gone through cancer treatment describe the first few months as a time of change. It’s not so much “getting back to normal” as it is finding out what’s normal for you now. People often say that life has new meaning or that they look at things differently. Your new normal may include:

- Changes in the way you eat and the things you do
- New or different sources of financial, social or emotional support
- Needing help doing things you used to do without problems
- Permanent scars on your body
- Emotional scars from going through so much

You may see yourself in a different way or find that others think of you differently now. Whatever your new normal may be, give yourself time to adapt to the changes. Take it one day at a time.

Dealing With the Fear of Recurrence

When your treatment is finished, you will probably be happy to be done so you can get back to how things used to be. At the same time, you may feel sad and worried. It’s very common to think about whether the cancer will come back and what happens now.

Fear about cancer coming back is the most common emotional challenge people face after cancer. [Cancer recurrence](#) is defined as when cancer comes back after you finish treatment and cancer has not been found in your body for a while. Usually, doctors call it a recurrence if there have been no signs of cancer for a year or more, but this can vary depending on the type of cancer you have. The cancer may come back in the same place it first started or it may appear somewhere else in the body.

You may have questions about the possibility of recurrence, such as:

- Will there ever be a time when I’ll be sure my cancer won’t come back?
- What should I look for if I am worried about a recurrence?
- What symptoms should I report to my healthcare team that might mean the cancer is back?
- What can I do to lower the chance my cancer will come back?
- What other health problems am I at risk for after my cancer treatment?

It’s normal to worry about the cancer coming back, especially during the first year after treatment. Survivors may become concerned that any new symptom could mean that the cancer has come back. It may help to keep a diary of symptoms to discuss at your next follow-up visit and to ask what the next steps are in your cancer follow-up care.

Although many people say their fear of cancer returning fades over time, things like follow-up visits, anniversary events or the illness of a family member can make you worry about your health. This is normal and a good time to seek support. ■