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# How to Manage Your Depression



The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Managing Depression after Cancer Treatment (University Health Network)
- Tips to Help You Manage Your Cancer Symptoms: Depression (Ottawa Hospital)
- Feeling Sad and Down (Sunnybrook Odette Cancer Centre)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about depression. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing depression. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

#### Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:

[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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Was this patient guide helpful? Let us know at: [cco.fluidsurveys.com/s/guides/](https://cco.fluidsurveys.com/s/guides/)

#### This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have depression before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is cancer-related depression?

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Depression is when feelings of sadness are strong and will not go away for weeks or months.

It causes other physical and emotional symptoms too.

Depression affects your quality of life and can lead to thoughts of suicide.

## Depression can:

Make it harder to cope with pain and other symptoms

Make it harder for your body to fight your cancer and infections

If you are thinking about suicide or harming yourself **call 911** or go to your nearest emergency room right away.

- It is normal to feel sad when you have cancer. If your sadness does not go away it might be a sign that you need treatment.
- A person who is depressed cannot just “snap out of it” or “cheer up”.

Lead to other health problems

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources about depression, visit this website:

[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### Canadian Mental Health Association

[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

### Cancer Care Ontario

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)  
1-888-939-3333

### Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

## Self-management class:

### Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions

[www.healthy-living-now.ca/](http://www.healthy-living-now.ca/)  
> What if I Live Elsewhere

### Living Life to the Full, classes and resources to help you cope

[www.lttf.ca](http://www.lttf.ca)

### Online Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Class (free)

[www.palousemindfulness.com](http://www.palousemindfulness.com)

## Self-help and support websites:

### Mood Gym

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

### Cancer Chat Canada

[www.cancerchat.ca](http://www.cancerchat.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society Support services

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### Progressive muscle relaxation

[www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com) and search progressive muscle relaxation

## Online book:

### The Emotional Facts of Life with Cancer: A guide to Counselling and Support for Patients, Families and Friends

Go to [www.capo.ca](http://www.capo.ca) > patient family resources > how do I get more information

## Apps:

### The Scarborough Hospital Mental Health App Library

[www.tsh.to](http://www.tsh.to) - search Mental Health App Library

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your symptom.



0 is no depression and 10 is the worst possible depression.		
0-3	4-6	7-10
<p>You may have <b>Mild</b> depression if:</p> <hr/> <p>Your depression symptoms get better after a couple of weeks</p> <hr/> <p>Your mood gets better when you do things to help yourself and get support</p> <hr/> <p>You are still able to do regular activities</p>	<p>You may have <b>Moderate</b> depression if:</p> <hr/> <p>You have some but not most symptoms of depression for two weeks or more</p> <hr/> <p>You are somewhat less able to do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning or working</p>	<p>You may have <b>Severe</b> depression if:</p> <hr/> <p>You have a depressed mood and / or loss of pleasure for 2 weeks or more</p> <hr/> <p>You also have these strong symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of worthlessness and / or guilt,</li> <li>• Thoughts of suicide</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping or sleeping all the time</li> <li>• Weight gain or loss</li> <li>• Tiredness (fatigue)</li> <li>• Trouble with memory and concentrating</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>You do not want to care for yourself and are struggling to do regular activities</p>

**Your depression may need treatment if:**

You think it is moderate or severe

You have any thoughts of wanting to die or kill yourself

# What are the symptoms of depression?

## Physical symptoms

Low energy

Feeling sluggish or restless and agitated

Sleeping and eating more or less than before

## People with cancer who have depression may:

Want to stop treatment

Worry a lot about cancer returning

Focus on bad outcomes

Not look after their health

## Emotional/Mental symptoms

Feeling hopeless or worthless

Not enjoying things you used to enjoy

Feelings of guilt or regret

Wanting to die

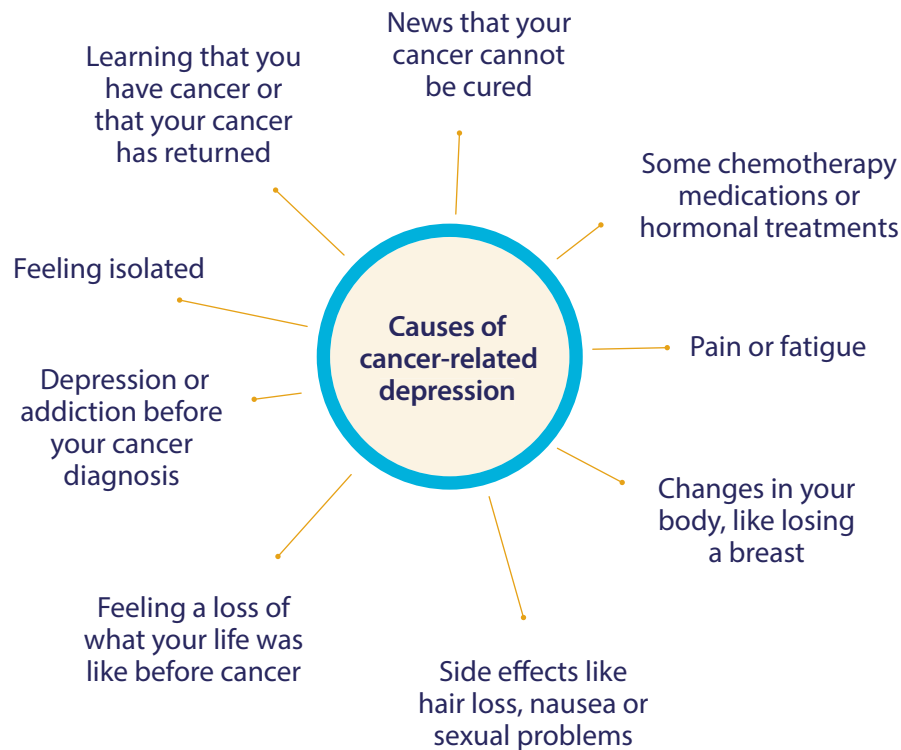
Worsened anxiety

Having trouble thinking, concentrating and remembering things

# What causes cancer-related depression?

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This picture shows things that can cause cancer-related depression:



# When should I talk to my health care team?

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Tell your health care team right away, go to your nearest emergency room or call 911 if you are thinking about committing suicide or have tried to commit suicide.

## What is symptom screening?

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

## Take prescribed medication

If your depression does not get better, or is getting worse, you may need to take medication to feel better.



### Medications for depression are called anti-depressants

Most anti-depressants are meant to be taken once a day and may take up to several weeks to work fully.

Your oncologist, family doctor or psychiatrist will prescribe a medication that is right for you.

It is usually best to get therapy or counselling along with taking medication.

**Antidepressants may have side effects. If you have side effects with one, your doctor may suggest switching to a different medication.**

Antidepressants are not addictive and are usually taken for at least six months.

### Be safe!

- ✓ Talk to your health care team before taking any herbal treatments for depression, like St. John's Wort. Natural health products may affect your other medications and treatment.

# What can I do to help my depression?

## Find support

Support from family, friends and your community can make you feel better and less alone.



### These tips can help you get support:

Talk with someone you trust who is a good listener.

Talk to a social worker about support programs at your cancer centre and in your community.

Talk to someone at your place of worship. Spiritual or religious advice may help you feel better.

Join a cancer support program to share stories with other people.

Try writing in a journal or making art to work through your feelings.

Find out about support resources in your community by contacting the Canadian Cancer Society.

Go to [www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

## Focus on things that make you feel better

Focus on the positive parts of your life and things you can control.



Feel grateful for the things and people that bring you joy.

Spend time with people who make you laugh.

Try to avoid negative people and things that cause you stress.

**Avoid or limit alcohol as it can lower your mood.** Visit Ontario Drug and Alcohol Helpline [www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca](http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca) or call **1-800-565-8603**

**Consider quitting smoking.** People who smoke during cancer treatment often say they feel guilty about it, which can make depression worse. Visit [www.smokershelpline.ca](http://www.smokershelpline.ca) for support.

## Get counseling to help you cope

With professional counseling you can learn different ways of thinking and acting to help you cope.

**Talk to your health care team about seeing a psychosocial oncology professional, like a:**

Psychiatrist

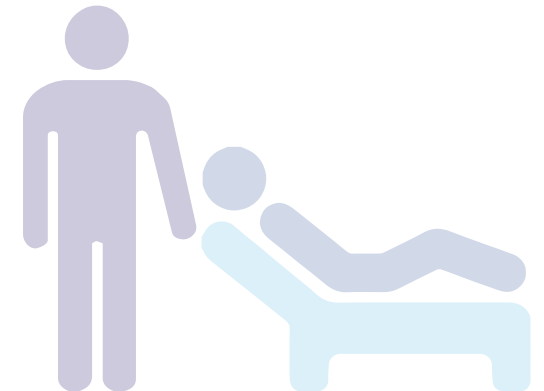
Psychologist

Psychotherapist

Social worker

**Ask at your cancer centre** or local community hospice about groups or programs that can help you cope with feelings of depression and stress.

See page 15 for some programs you can do online.



## Make lists of calming, enjoyable and useful activities



### When you feel sad or down, get your list and choose an activity.

#### Include:

Things you enjoy, like going for a walk, watching your favourite TV shows, or taking a bath.

Things you need to do, like chores and appointments.

Put all of your chores into a daily or weekly schedule. Doing them will help you feel in control and useful.

Do your activities even if you do not enjoy them as much as usual or feel up to doing them.

## Try relaxation activities

These may help you relax and manage your feelings and stress.



### Relaxation activities or treatments to try:

Mindfulness Meditation training

Massage

Yoga

Acupuncture

Hypnosis

Music or art therapy

Deep breathing

Guided imagery (imagining yourself in a pleasant, calm place)

## Eat well

A balanced diet can help you feel more energetic and positive.



### These tips can help you eat well:

Eat something every 3 to 4 hours. You need fuel often to keep your mind and body working at their best.

Keep healthy snacks on hand like nuts, fruit, vegetables and yogurt.

Eat foods rich in omega 3 fatty acids like, fish, flax seeds and walnuts. These foods can help improve your mood.

Limit foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, like processed foods, desserts, sugary drinks and fast food.

Limit caffeine (coffee, tea, cola and chocolate).

**Ask your health care team** to refer you to a registered dietitian. A dietitian can help you find ways to help with symptoms that make eating a challenge. Visit **EatRightOntario.ca** or call **1-877-510-5102** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

For more healthy eating tips read the Canadian Cancer Society's 'Eating well when you have cancer' patient information booklet. Go to [www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

## Exercise and take care of your body

Exercise is a good way to improve your mood. It makes endorphins, which are chemicals in your body that are natural pain killers and mood boosters.



Choose an activity you like that suits your health and fitness level.

Start slowly with light exercise like walking, swimming or yoga.

Go at your own pace. Slowly increase the amount and difficulty of your exercise.

### Be safe!

- ✓ You can exercise at any time during or after treatment.
- ✓ Always talk to your health care team about how to exercise safely.
- ✓ Stop and rest if you feel sore, stiff or out of breath.

## Improve your sleep

Getting good sleep can help to give you more energy and feel better emotionally.



### These tips can help improve your sleep:

Set a time for planning and worrying in the early evening so that you do not think about these things when you are trying to fall asleep.

Do relaxing activities, like reading or listening to music, before going to bed.

If you do not fall asleep after 20 – 30 minutes, get out of bed. Only go back to bed when you feel like you may be able to fall asleep.

Go to [www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms) and see the Fatigue patient guide for more tips.