

# The psychological impact of cancer



Learning that you have cancer can be devastating. It can turn your whole life upside down. It can also affect your family and friends. Here are some ideas and resources to help you through this tough time.

## When you learn you have cancer

People who have cancer often experience a high level of stress that they may find difficult to deal with. There are so many unknown factors and so many questions to ask. What effects will the treatments have on me? Am I going to get better?

When you're told you have cancer, it's natural to react in one of these ways:

- experiencing a sense of "shock"
- not believing the diagnosis, especially if you haven't had any symptoms
- feeling angry
- feeling that the situation is so unfair
- having no reaction or just a mild reaction for a while

Many people also:

- feel they've lost control of their lives
- are afraid their body and self-image will change
- feel powerless, sad, guilty
- worry about their job, their relationship with their partner and children, etc.

These reactions reveal what you're feeling inside. Pay close attention to your reactions. They will show you how you need to take care of yourself, reach out to your support system and find a new life balance.

## Stages that can be difficult

Certain stages can be especially difficult:

- waiting for medical tests
- receiving test results
- discussing treatment options
- experiencing side effects
- finishing your treatment and resuming an active life



**You can count on your care team for support at any time. Feel free to reach out and ask for help.**

## Forms of distress you may feel

Each person experiences the disease and treatments in a different way. Some people have strong reactions and experience psychological distress. This may take the form of:

- > **physical signs:** these may be unconnected to the disease or treatments, e.g. stomach ache, headache, loss of appetite, insomnia (difficulty to sleep), muscle tension, fatigue, trouble concentrating, etc.
- > **unusual behaviours:** losing interest in activities you normally enjoy, being irritable and aggressive, avoiding family and friends, being completely disorganized, etc.
- > **false beliefs:** for example, telling yourself “It’s my own fault I have cancer” or “I deserve this” or “I should stay home and not see anyone to avoid infection.”
- > **intense emotions:** frequent bouts of crying, extreme anxiety or anger, etc.

## Watch for signs of distress

These signs can become a concern if :

- they are intense
- they continue for a long time
- they affect your everyday tasks; e.g. you can’t stop crying, can’t sleep, you avoid seeing others for fear of catching an infection.

**If you’ve had psychological issues in the past,** such as depression, tell your doctor.

**If you think you need help, don’t wait** – talk to a care team member. It may be helpful to see a psychologist. About 1 in 3 people followed for cancer at the CHUM see the psychologist on our team. By getting help promptly, you’ll feel better psychologically and adjust more easily to the situation.

## The role of the psychologist

The psychologist on the oncology team evaluates the psychological impact of cancer on patients and their support circle. Your psychologist will listen as you express your distress. He or she will look at your history, lifestyle, and plans, trying to ease your suffering and help you find ways of coping.

Feel free to see the psychologist at any stage of your treatment and follow-up.



## To make an appointment with a psychologist

Just ask a member of your care team how to proceed.



If you have pervasive thoughts of death or suicidal ideas, don’t delay – see a psychologist right away or go to the emergency room at the nearest hospital.

## What you can do

You know best what makes you feel better. Here are some things that can help:

- > Maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, because they're good for your body and good for morale:
  - eat a healthy diet
  - sleep well: sleep is essential to your recovery
  - get regular exercise and enjoy relaxing activities (e.g. visualization, meditation, yoga, etc.)



**Your physical condition may change. For example, you may be extremely tired for two or three days after your chemotherapy treatment. Know your limits.**

- > Bring a friend or family member with you to your appointments. Support can make a big difference.
- > Learn more about the disease by asking the members of your care team, going to lectures and conferences, etc.
- > Express yourself through your favourite activities: drawing, singing, writing, etc.
- > Seek support from family and friends:
  - keep them informed about your state of health
  - tell them what you need and expect from them
  - don't try to face your problems on your own
- > Join a support group, call a talk line or team up with a cancer buddy (see the resource list).



## USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society:

- > **1 888 939-3333**
- > **cancer.ca**

Quebec Cancer Foundation:

- > **1 800 363-0063**
- > **fqc.qc.ca/en**

Virage:

This foundation provides information and support for CHUM patients with cancer:

- > **514 890-8000, ext. 28139**
- > **viragecancer.org** (in French)

Regroupement des aidants et aidantes naturels du Québec (for family caregivers):

- > **1 855 524-1959**
- > **ranq.qc.ca**

Canadian Virtual Hospice:

- > **virtualhospice.ca**

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available (in French only). Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site  
**chumontreal.qc.ca/votresante**

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
**chumontreal.qc.ca**



## Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.






## Observations - Comments

Write down observations you feel are important: your symptoms, treatments, follow-up, energy level, spirit, etc.






## Upcoming appointments


To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)

