

10 TIPS FOR LIVING WITH CANCER



Cancer of any type can be a long and difficult journey but there are ways to make yourself feel stronger, and more comfortable and able to cope.

KEEP CALM

'A cancer diagnosis comes as a shock', says Shereen Abramowitz, a clinical psychologist at Life Roseacres Clinic in Germiston. 'Stay calm and find yourself a trusted oncologist. Once they give you a treatment plan, you will feel less stressed as it provides some structure in a sea of uncertainty'. Your instinct may be to have the cancer removed as quickly as possible, but check with your healthcare team. Many cancers do not require immediate attention, meaning you can spend more time exploring your options. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and bring a friend or partner to help you remember the answers', advises Abramowitz. 'These visits are stressful and a companion helps lessen anxiety'.

WISE UP

Part of the fear of cancer is of the unknown. Contact the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) for reliable information about your type of cancer, and

links to counsellors, as well as support groups for first-hand accounts from survivors (www.cansa.org.za). If you choose to tap into the wealth of information online, stick to reputable medical websites attached to major universities or hospitals. 'Knowledge is power; if you understand your disease, it'll be easier to live with it,' says Dr Rouchelle Marais, a clinical and radiation oncologist at Life Eugene Marais Hospital in Pretoria.

SHAPE UP

Whatever treatment you have will be better tolerated if you are in the best possible shape. Now is not the time to reach for comfort foods or follow a restrictive fad diet, says Jessica Veltman, a dietician at Life Fourways Hospital in Johannesburg. 'Cancer patients can experience nausea, loss of appetite, metallic tastes or dry mouths, so suck lemon sweets or ice cubes and eat small, frequent meals that are nutrient-dense.

Include plenty of fresh vegetables, salads and fruit – aim for a variety of colours and don't over-cook.

Berries, citrus, spinach, beetroot and tomatoes are high in

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phytonutrients and antioxidants, have low-fat dairy, whole grains, lean protein and oily fish like salmon and sardines. Studies suggest omega-3 supplements may help reduce tumour growth,' says Veltman. She adds that you should avoid refined and processed foods, hydrogenated oils and trans fats, as some studies show caffeine, highly sugary foods and smoked products can stimulate tumour growth. Cut out any pathogens from the diet, such as those found in veined cheeses, and avoid alcohol, she says.

It's also important to try to stub out smoking. 'Research shows that people with any type of cancer who quit smoking have a better quality of life, says Dr Marais. 'Inflammation in the lungs decreases, allowing more oxygen to flow to the cells. This helps with the fatigue, and secondly, life expectancy is longer'.

Discuss with your doctor whether or not you are allowed to exercise, or which exercise would be suitable for your condition. Walking or swimming can boost your immune system, control weight, lift spirits with endorphins, help you sleep better, and ready your body for treatment. 'It's a good idea to begin by joining a supervised programme', says Dr Marais. 'Start slowly and find a routine that suits you. Many patients find the social aspects of exercise are the most enjoyable'.

BE PREPARED

Whether you are going for surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy, take steps to make life easier when you get home. Stock up on healthy, easily digestible foods, and make soup packed with vegetables and freeze it, says Veltman. Put clean sheets on the bed, lay on reading material, videos and puzzles, and arrange for help with lifts, shopping and chores at home.

FIND SUPPORT

'Some people are very open about their diagnosis, while others choose to keep it private', says Abramowitz. 'There are no rules, but support from a few trusted individuals is imperative to help you cope'. Friends may fear upsetting you by saying the wrong thing and withdraw, and employers and colleagues may wonder if you are healthy enough to do your job – most will take their cues from you though. Let them know that although cancer can be frightening, they should not be afraid to be around you. At times you will be too tired for talking or company – tell them. Appoint someone concerned friends and colleagues can call to check on how you're doing.

ACCEPT HELP

Your cancer can be hard on those you love, who feel worried and powerless. Doing things for you gives them a sense of making a contribution. 'Accept offers of help, and don't be afraid to ask for help, even if you don't usually', says Abramowitz. Having different friends run errands, do chores, take kids to school, and feed pets also takes the burden off your primary care-giver and helps them prevent burnout.

ACCEPT YOURSELF

'Cancer can bring many changes, some are short-term and others will last forever', says Dr Marais. 'It's important to mourn your losses – they are real and you have a right to grieve. Also look for new ways to enhance your appearance'. If you are having chemotherapy, your hair may fall out. Getting a stylish short haircut ahead of time can make the change less obvious, or shop now for a great wig or fun hats.

CLEAN UP

Chemotherapy kills both cancerous and healthy cells, lowering immunity and making even minor infections dangerous. You are at great risk about a week after treatment, when white blood cells are at their lowest, so avoid crowds and public transport for those days, says Dr Marais. Ask people with colds to keep a distance, and wash your hands often with soap. 'Ensure that you clean vegetable and fruit skins well,' says Veltman. If you're a nail biter, stop. Take special care of your mouth, which is lined with rapidly dividing cells. These are the kind that chemotherapy targets, leaving you prone to mouth ulcers and tears from brushing. Use a soft toothbrush and an antiseptic mouthwash afterwards.

KEEP WORKING

As long as you are well, carry on working if you can, says Abramowitz. 'Going to work gives a sense of purpose and makes you feel normal, as opposed to being a cancer patient. You may have to share aspects of your treatment with your company management, so that they understand when you will not be able to be at work'.

STAY UPBEAT

'Never give up – keep on fighting!' encourages Dr Thomas Erasmus, an oncologist at Life Rosepark Hospital in Bloemfontein. Stress can continue even once you're in the clear, as most cancer survivors still fear a recurrence. 'Denial is okay', says Abramowitz. 'It can help you forget about the cancer and regain the carefree and joyous feelings about life you once felt'. Don't dwell on what could happen – focus on the present and the positives in your life, she urges. 'Believe and you will get better and live a long and healthy life.' When Nelspruit pastor Michael Laubscher had surgery for prostate cancer last year, he says two things helped his recovery: 'Learning to move from any concentrated interest in a "terminal illness" to a fulfilling and potentially exciting, living future. And a conscious change of thinking from "Oh pity me, I am so ill," to "How can my experience benefit others?"

For more information on this topic please contact the employee wellness programme

CANSA's CancerCare Coping kit (audio CD) provides info and practical tips to help you and your loved ones cope with cancer – call toll-free 0800 22 6622 or email info@cansa.org.za

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