Managing the Stress of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Dear Patient,

Many cancer survivors and their loved ones are feeling extra stress due to the coronavirus pandemic. Here, we’ve addressed common questions and emotional reactions. We hope this helps you discuss and respond in healthy ways.

Are you in the high-risk group of people for complications of coronavirus?

It’s important to know your risk level. Check coronavirus.gov for the latest information. In general, the risk of developing complications of coronavirus is increased in people over 60 years old who contract the infection. You are also at increased risk if you have a serious medical condition (heart, lung or kidney disease; diabetes), cancer, or immunodeficiency.

The more factors you have, the greater your risk of complications. That said, most people who become infected survive, including those with high risk who receive proper medical care.

How are cancer and immunodeficiency related?

Your immune system is a complex network of cells, tissues and organs that fight infections and other diseases, including cancer. The immune system in patients with immunodeficiency does not work normally to fight infections and other diseases. This is common in people who have or had cancer.

Some patients were born with or developed immunodeficiency, and then their underlying immunodeficiency made it easier to develop cancer. For others, cancer and/or cancer treatments caused damage to their immune system.

Are you immunodeficient?

Maybe not. Not all cancers are associated with immunodeficiency. Not all cancer treatments cause immunodeficiency during or after therapy. We can determine if you are immunodeficient by reviewing your medical history and your current diagnoses, test results, and therapies.

What if you feel anxious about being exposed to coronavirus at the clinic or hospital where you receive your cancer therapy?

We will notify you if new information suggests that the risk to you of catching coronavirus outweighs the risk of delaying your cancer treatments or follow-up visits.

The coronavirus is new, but protecting patients from infection has been routine for decades. Protecting you from infections remains a high priority. We are monitoring the evolving situation with coronavirus and receiving regular updates from the CDC and infectious disease specialists. We are adjusting our precautions as necessary.

How closely do you need to follow the news about coronavirus?

We suggest you keep up enough to take proper steps. That means checking coronavirus.gov periodically and, maybe, checking the news once every few days. If something about your condition or your circumstances changes (such as developing a new symptom), then check out the latest information. If the topic increases your anxiety, first learn what you need to know for now, and then minimize how much you watch, read, or talk about coronavirus.

Why might you feel more anxious about your overall health?

That’s understandable. This coronavirus is new. New threats tend to feel scarier than ones you’re used to. All the unknowns about this coronavirus make the situation more unsettling for everyone, even though medical experts are making rapid strides in their knowledge.

The media is bombarding you with frightening stories and statistics, including that cancer is a risk factor for complications. That reminds you daily (hourly!) of your vulnerability, making it difficult to put out-of-mind.

You’ve lost something that helps many patients deal with the uncertainties and disruptions of cancer: namely focusing on parts of life that feel normal. Right now, the entire world is undergoing daily disruptions due to dramatic changes at work and home. Non-cancer life feels a bit surreal, and that can increase anxiety.

What can you do if you feel increased anxiety about your risk?

Please let us know. Meanwhile, keep in mind that…

• This coronavirus crisis will pass.
• Most patients survive infection with coronavirus, including those at high risk who receive proper medical care.
• Adjusting to the changes and getting into a new routine will allow you to know the risk without thinking about it all the time.
• You know the risks of car accidents yet don’t think about them while buckling up and driving.
• To further help decrease fear and anxiety…
  • Channel anxiety into motivation to take steps to increase your overall health (see below). If you smoke, it’s a good time to quit.
  • Reaffirm your commitment to reporting worrisome symptoms.
  • Focus on joyful, meaningful activities and relationships having nothing to do with illness.

What can you do to boost your immune system?

You may have heard of prescription medications that boost white blood cells. Those are indicated only for certain medical conditions or in combination with certain therapies. If considering over-the-counter supplements, please discuss this with us first to avoid doing something that might interfere with your therapies or cause additional problems.

The primary way you can strengthen your immune system sounds ho-hum but is very important: pursuing health-promoting behaviors. Really. Strong evidence supports an association between improved immunity and…

• Obtaining adequate, high-quality sleep.
• Eating a nutritious diet.
• Getting some exercise.
• Managing stress.
• Avoiding cold, flu, stomach bugs, and other illnesses.

These steps are effective ways to help you get through cancer treatment and recovery, and maintain your best health. Tell us if you have difficulty with any of these measures, so we can address them.

What about my family and friends?

To avoid catching coronavirus, minimize exposure to anyone who has symptoms of a cold or upper respiratory infection (even if they say, “It’s allergies.”). Follow the CDC guidelines for minimizing spread.

What now?

Take a breath. This crisis shall pass. Call us if you have symptoms. Please let us know if you have questions or concerns. We’ve been through tough times before. We’ll get through this together.