



Canadian
Cancer
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Helping Someone with Cancer

What you can do



Let's Make Cancer History

1 888 939-3333 | www.cancer.ca

Chances are that someone you know – maybe a neighbour, co-worker or friend – is facing a cancer diagnosis. There are lots of helpful things that you can do for someone with cancer and their family. Some people are good at offering support simply by listening, while others like to help out with day-to-day tasks and chores. It's important to do what feels right for you. This pamphlet will get you started with tips on how you can help.¹

¹ If you have cancer or are caring for someone who has cancer, you may want more information than is provided here. To find out more, call one of our information specialists toll-free at 1 888 939-3333, e-mail us at info@cis.cancer.ca or visit our website www.cancer.ca.

HELPING SOMEONE WITH CANCER

What you can do

Cancer is a word that most of us fear - it makes us think of death. But more and more people are surviving this disease. So, while it's normal to feel afraid for someone who has cancer, you can also be hopeful.

If someone you know is waiting for test results, the waiting period is often very difficult. This is where you can start to help. You can listen, and share the worry they feel. The fact that you are waiting with them can make the wait easier.

Don't forget that a cancer diagnosis affects more than just the person with cancer. Family and close friends of someone with cancer are often dealing with their own shock and will have to adjust to cancer being a part of their lives. They will need help and support as well.

Understanding that cancer can influence emotions

Cancer affects the body. People with cancer are often tired or perhaps in pain. They may feel ill, either from the cancer itself or from treatments. But it's important to remember that cancer can influence someone's emotions or feelings as well. Feelings may come and go, or change suddenly. Many people will want time alone to sort out their thoughts and emotions. After a diagnosis of cancer, someone may feel:

Shocked: This may be the first emotion felt after a cancer diagnosis. At first, someone may even think that the diagnosis isn't right, especially if they're not feeling sick.

Worried, scared or anxious: There are many things that someone with cancer might be worried about. For example, they may be afraid or worried about being in pain, looking different during or after treatment, paying their bills, keeping their job or dying.

Guilty: People with cancer may blame themselves for upsetting the people they love. They may worry about being a burden to others right now or in the future. Sometimes people with cancer think they have it because of something they did or didn't do. They might ask themselves what symptoms they could have noticed earlier.

Lonely: Cancer may make someone feel distant from other people. They may feel too sick to take part in activities or social events that they used to enjoy. Sometimes, someone with cancer may feel that no one understands what they are going through.

Sad or hopeless: Someone with cancer may be sad about the loss of their good health, or the loss of their ability to do the things they used to do. Sadness may come and go, or it may be there almost all of the time. It can be hard to feel hopeful when the future is so uncertain.

Angry: Anger sometimes comes from feelings that are hard to show, such as fear, anxiety, frustration or helplessness. Someone with cancer can't get mad at the cancer itself, so anger may be directed at family or friends, the healthcare team or whoever happens to be close at hand.

People may be upset in different ways and they will all respond in the best way they can. One way is not better than the other.

Not everyone with cancer seems upset by it. This doesn't mean that they are hiding their feelings. It may simply be their way of coping. Some will use humour or take up new hobbies to keep their mind off things. For some people, cancer makes them think about – and focus on – what is really important in their lives.

Spending time with someone who has cancer

Many people are unsure about visiting someone who has cancer – it can be scary if you don't know what to expect. If someone looks different on the outside, it may be hard to accept that the person is still the same on the inside. But people with cancer need to know that you and other people are there for them, so try not to shut them out. Spending time with them can boost their spirits and make them feel part of life.

Try these tips when spending time with someone with cancer:

- Let the person with cancer be the leader. When they want to talk, listen. Make sure you listen to **how** they talk, not just what they say. Try to hear what they mean but may not be able to say. Don't offer advice unless you're asked to.
- Respect their wishes. Every person with cancer has their own feelings about cancer. Some people don't want to talk about it. Others may want to talk about it one day but not the next.
- Set aside time for visiting when you won't be distracted, and take the time you need to listen well. Turn off cell phones or pagers, and focus on the person you are visiting.
- Try to relate to the person in the same way that you did when they were in good health. Your visit will give pleasure to the person with cancer if you can let them know that you still care. When you can't come up with the words, a hug, a touch or a look filled with love can say it all.

- Ask “**What** are you feeling?” rather than “**How** are you feeling?” This may help someone with cancer open up more. Don't say “*I can imagine how you must feel*” or “*I know how you feel*” to a person with cancer – because unless you've been through a similar cancer experience, you can't.
- Don't feel that you have to say something all the time. Silence can help people pull their thoughts together. Talking all the time can just be words, words and more words, without any real meaning.
- Don't take things too personally. It's normal for someone with cancer to be quieter than usual, to need time alone and to seem angry at times.
- Try to keep your eyes on the person you are talking to. If you keep looking around, they might wonder if you're being honest and open. People can also pick up things from the tone of your voice or the way your face looks. Touching and smiling show someone with cancer that they still mean as much to you, even if they are ill.
- Tell a joke and laugh – it may help the person with cancer get their mind off their illness. People with cancer do not want to talk about their disease all the time. It's okay to laugh and enjoy life, even when ill.
- Stay in touch as time passes. Regular contact – a card, phone call or visit – can mean a lot. People with cancer often have many visitors when they are first diagnosed, but cancer treatment and recovery can go on for some time.

Helping in practical ways

There are many ways that you can help people with cancer or the people who are caring for them. Having help with some practical or everyday parts of life can allow them to concentrate on other things, such as treatment or getting some rest.

One way you can help is offering to become a source of information. Be sensitive to the fact that everyone's need for information is different. Some people with cancer may want as much information as can be found, while others may not want to know details about their illness. You could find out more about the type of cancer the person has or help by finding out about programs and services available in their community. Services may include many things such as wheelchair rentals, nursing care at home, wigs, prostheses or support programs that connect someone living with cancer with a trained volunteer who has had a similar cancer experience.

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You can also:

- Find new ways to do things. Cancer and cancer treatment can make people weak. For example, invite a barber or hairdresser to the house if the person can't get out for a haircut.
- Offer specific help. Asking "**When** can I..." rather than "**What** can I..." may make it easier for the person or their family to accept your

help. Ask when can you look after the children or do the laundry, when can you cut the grass or when can you get the car cleaned.

- Prepare ready-made meals for the family - things that are easy to freeze and re-heat. Taking care of grocery shopping is another way to help. Check first to see if cancer treatment has affected what the person with cancer can eat.
- Drive them to and from their medical appointments.
- Follow through on what you offer. Even better, do it more than once. Be someone they can count on and turn to for help.

Keep offering help and support

You may find that while offering help and support is easy at first, it gets harder as time goes by. Try to remember that your support is important. It may help the person find the courage they need to lead as full a life as the illness will allow.

Sometimes cancer and cancer treatment will mean that a person's daily life will have to change. The adjustment may mean that they have to do special exercises, get help around the house or be trained for a new job. Be aware that all of this can take time, and that it affects not just the person with cancer but the whole family as well. Along the way, you can offer help and support.

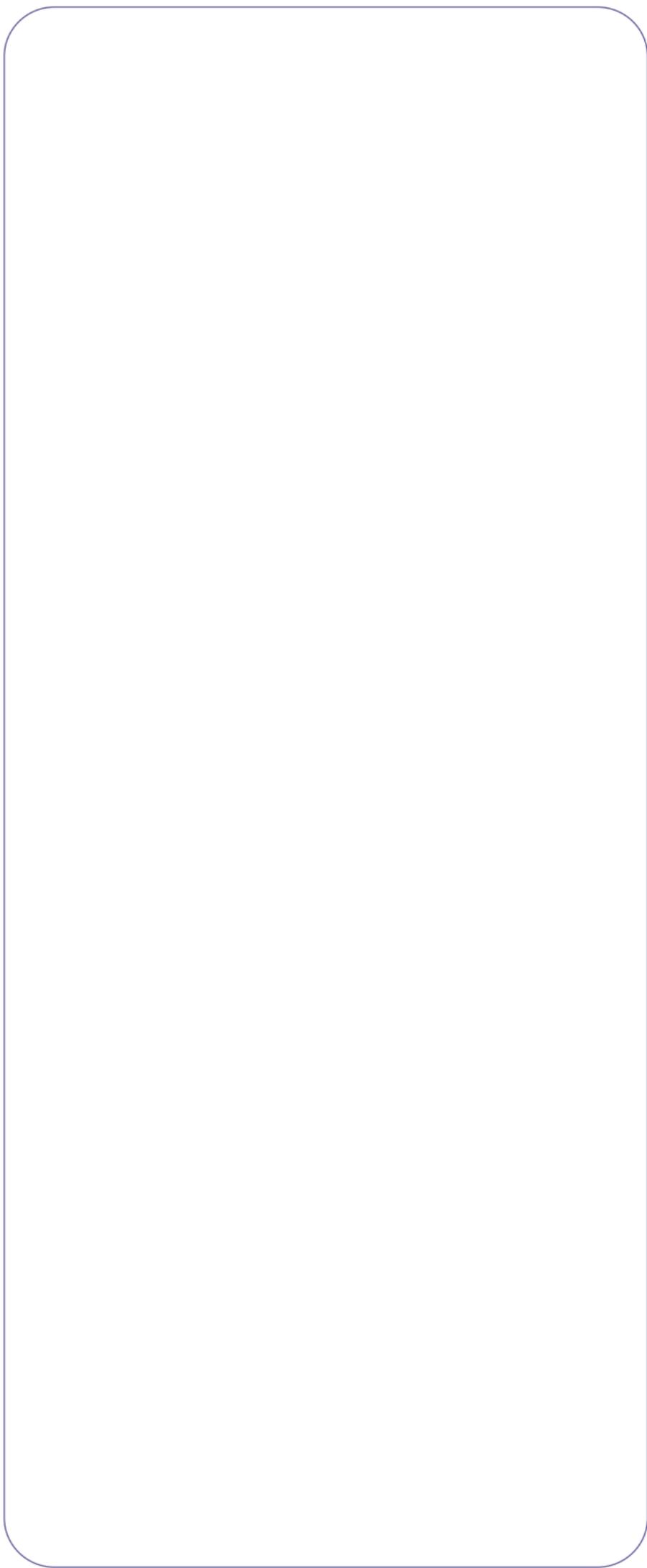
Facing the end of life

Sometimes, someone with cancer doesn't get better. Many people find it very hard to talk about death and don't really know what to say or do. You can help someone who is dying by being with them and showing you care. People dying of cancer still need love, friendship and support.

Remember that even in the later stages of cancer, you should respect the wishes of the person with cancer. It is up to them to accept or refuse further treatment. Try to be aware of your own ideas and views about death. Don't let them interfere with how you help someone else face their death or the death of someone close to them.

When someone dies after an illness, it's quite common to feel a range of emotions. You might feel sad or even angry. You may be relieved that their suffering is over. You may feel guilty that you're still alive when someone else has died.

It is important to accept the fact that you are grieving and to allow yourself time to do so. It's okay to grieve in your own way, and to deal with grief in a way that makes you feel better. It's okay to need some help when you're dealing with loss. You may want to talk to your doctor, clergy or someone else you trust. They can help you get the support you need to move forward.



What we do

Thanks to the work of our volunteers and staff, and the generosity of our donors, the Canadian Cancer Society is leading the way in the fight against cancer. The Canadian Cancer Society:

- funds excellent research for all types of cancer
- advocates for healthy public policy
- promotes healthy lifestyles to help reduce cancer risk
- provides information about cancer
- supports people living with cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer, our services, or to make a donation.



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