



Testicular cancer, anxiety and depression

Most men who experience testicular cancer have a good quality of life following their treatment. But some experience anxiety or depression that interferes with their daily living. Taking a positive approach to your health, including being aware of the signs of anxiety and depression, and when to take action, can ensure you stay well.

If you do experience anxiety or depression, it's important to remember there are a range of steps you can take. Through taking action in a systematic way, and in collaboration with others, you can reduce the impact of anxiety and depression.

What is testicular cancer?

Testicular cancer occurs when cells in the testes divide abnormally forming a lump in the testes, which can spread to other parts of the body.

Testicular cancer is relatively rare, affecting about 700 Australians every year.¹ It is the second most common form of cancer in men aged 20–40.

Testicular cancer can be effectively treated and cured. The five year survival rate for men diagnosed with testicular cancer is 98 per cent.² Treatment usually involves surgery to remove the testicle containing the cancer. Some testicular cancers, if caught early, can be cured by surgery alone, while others may require chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy.

What are the links between anxiety, depression and testicular cancer?

Being diagnosed with any type of cancer can trigger a range of different feelings. Men who have been diagnosed with testicular cancer may feel shocked, disappointed, angry, distressed or fearful about their future. These feelings usually lessen over time. However, some men may experience these feelings intensely and for longer periods of time.

Some major worries that can lead to anxiety include:

- fears about the cancer recurring
- guilt for delays in seeking diagnosis and treatment
- sexual performance anxiety
- concerns about fertility
- changes in physical appearance
- financial worries.

Almost one-fifth of men who experience testicular cancer develop symptoms of anxiety.³ This is more likely to occur in younger men and men who are already experiencing other difficulties (for example if they have already had a mental health problem, are going through a tough economic time or are drinking a lot of alcohol). Men with testicular cancer are more likely to experience anxiety, and at higher anxiety levels, than men in the general population.

Feelings of grief or loss after surgery for testicular cancer are a normal reaction and usually pass with time. But combined with the fatigue that sometimes follows treatment, these feelings may lead to depression. It's important to remember that each person is different and it's often a combination of factors that puts a person at risk of developing anxiety or depression.

What is anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious sometimes – and in the event of a cancer diagnosis some level of anxiety is certainly expected.

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. Anxious feelings are a normal reaction to a situation where a person feels under pressure and usually passes once the situation is over, or the 'stressor' is removed.

However, for some people these anxious feelings happen for no apparent reason or continue after the stressful event has passed. For a person experiencing anxiety, anxious feelings cannot be brought under control easily. Anxiety can be a serious condition that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life.

A cancer diagnosis is one of many things – such as a family history of anxiety and depression, stressful life events and personality factors – that may trigger anxiety.

Anxiety is common and the sooner a person takes action, the sooner they can recover.

Signs of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety can often develop gradually over time. Given that we all experience some anxious feelings, it can be hard to know how much is too much. There are many types of anxiety, and there is a range of symptoms for each. Therefore, you should learn more about the condition and how it impacts you.

Anxiety can be expressed in different ways such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event.

Some common symptoms of anxiety include:

- hot and cold flushes
- racing heart
- tightening of the chest
- snowballing worries
- obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour.

Often the anxiety that people experience after a cancer diagnosis is generalised and the symptoms may not fit neatly into one of the defined types of anxiety.

For more information on anxiety see the *beyondblue Understanding anxiety* fact sheet or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/anxiety

What is depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason. Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on all elements of your health.

Depression affects how a person feels about themselves. A person may lose interest in work, hobbies and doing things they normally enjoy. Some people may lack energy, have difficulty sleeping or sleep more than usual, while some people feel anxious or irritable and find it hard to concentrate.

The good news is, just like a physical condition, depression is treatable and effective treatments are available.

Signs of depression

A person may be depressed if they have felt sad, down or miserable most of the time for more than two weeks and/or has lost interest or pleasure in usual activities, and has also experienced some of the signs and symptoms on the list below.

It's important to note that everyone experiences some of these symptoms from time to time and it may not necessarily mean a person is depressed. Equally, not every person who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms. The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis – for that you need to see a health professional – but they can be used as a guide.

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- not going out anymore, loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- being unable to concentrate and not getting things done at work or school
- feeling overwhelmed, indecisive and lacking in confidence
- increased alcohol and drug use



- loss or change of appetite and significant weight loss or gain
- trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep and being tired during the day
- feeling worthless, helpless and guilty
- increased irritability, frustration and moodiness
- feeling unhappy, sad or miserable most of the time
- thoughts such as, "I'm a failure", "Life's not worth living", "People would be better off without me".

For more information on depression see the *beyondblue Anxiety and depression: An information booklet* or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/depression

What can I do?

There is no one way that people recover from anxiety or depression and it's different for everybody. However, there is a range of effective strategies and health professionals who can help people on the road to recovery. The important thing is finding the right strategy that works for you.

Supporting yourself

There are lots of different things you can do so find an approach that best suits you. For example, try to stay active and make plans for the day – they don't have to be grand plans, just small things like going for a run, talking to a mate or doing some gardening. Try to include activities or hobbies that you specifically enjoy.

At first, you may not enjoy them as much as you did before, but if you keep active and persist, the enjoyment should return. It's important to look after your body by staying physically active, eating healthily and getting plenty of sleep. Try not to drink or take drugs to block out how you're feeling and what is happening – this is not a positive long-term solution and only makes the anxiety or depression worse.

Who can assist?

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good first step to discuss your concerns. Your GP can:

- make a diagnosis
- check for any physical health problem or medication that may be contributing to the condition
- work with you on creating an action plan
- if appropriate, work with the person to draw up a Mental Health Treatment Plan so he or she can get a Medicare rebate for psychological treatment
- provide brief counselling or, in some cases, psychological therapies
- prescribe medication
- refer a person to a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist.

Make sure that the doctor managing your cancer knows if you have anxiety or depression. It is recommended that people consult their regular GP or another GP in the same clinic, as medical information is shared within a practice.

Psychologists are health professionals who provide psychological therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Psychologists are not doctors and cannot prescribe medication in Australia.

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychiatric assessments, conduct medical tests, provide therapy and prescribe medication. Psychiatrists often use psychological treatments such as CBT, IPT and/or medication. If the condition requires hospital admission, a psychiatrist will be in charge of the person's treatment.

Occupational therapists in mental health help people who, because of a mental health condition, have difficulty participating in normal, everyday activities. Mental health occupational therapists also provide focused psychological self-help strategies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers understand the mental health issues of Indigenous people and what is needed to provide culturally safe and accessible services. Some may have undertaken training in mental health



and psychological therapies. Support provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers might include, but is not limited to, case management, screening, assessment, referrals, transport to and attendance at specialist appointments, education, improving access to mainstream services, advocacy, counselling, support for family and acute distress response.

The cost of treatment from a mental health professional varies. However, in the same way that people can get a Medicare rebate when they see a doctor, they can also get part or all of the consultation fee subsidised when they see a mental health professional for treatment of anxiety or depression. See *beyondblue's Getting help – How much does it cost?* fact sheet at www.beyondblue.org.au/resources

To find a mental health practitioner in your area, visit www.beyondblue.org.au/find-a-professional or call the *beyondblue* Support Service on 1300 22 4636.

What are the treatments for anxiety and depression?

Psychological treatments

Psychological therapies may not only help with recovery, but can also help prevent a recurrence of anxiety or depression. These therapies help build skills in coping with stressful life circumstances and can be provided by a psychologist, psychiatrist or other trained health professional.

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** is an effective treatment for

people with anxiety and depression. It teaches people to evaluate their thinking about common difficulties, helping them to change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations.

- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT)** is also effective for treating depression and some types of anxiety. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.

Medication

For some people, medication might be necessary. Most people using medication report a significant improvement in their condition, and greater capacity to get back to the things they used to enjoy. Antidepressants take at least two weeks before they start to work, and it may also take some time for the doctor to find the medication and dose that is most effective for you.

Helpful strategies and tips

- Learn about anxiety, depression and testicular cancer and how these conditions interact.
- Talk. Don't bottle up your feelings – discuss them with mates, your partner or family members. It might also be helpful to join a support group.
- Write down your worries, whatever they are. This can help identify steps that might help you to address your concerns.
- Make time to socialise and do what you enjoy. Allowing time to relax can help reduce stress.

- Eat a healthy diet, try to get enough sleep and exercise.
- Go easy on yourself. It's normal to feel upset or angry about your cancer diagnosis. Asking for help does not mean you are weak.
- Plan with your doctor – have an action plan to combat anxiety and depression.
- If you have to use medication, then use it as prescribed. Talk to your doctor about possible barriers to taking medicine, such as cost, organisation or planning, as well as what to do if your symptoms worsen. Limit your substance use (including alcohol, tobacco and coffee).

How family and friends can help

When a person has testicular cancer and anxiety or depression, it can affect family and friends. It's important for family and friends to look after their own health as well as looking after the person who has cancer.

- Learn about testicular cancer, anxiety and depression and their symptoms to help you recognise warning signs. Support the person by helping them to follow their testicular cancer and mental health plans. Gently remind the person to take their medication regularly and to attend all their medical appointments.
- Encourage the person with testicular cancer to do things that they would normally enjoy.
- Look after your own health by eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and doing things that you enjoy, too.

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- Encourage the person to go to the doctor if their anxiety or depression gets worse. Make sure you seek help if you think you need it, too.

Things to remember

- Nine out of 10 men with testicular cancer are cured of the cancer and have the same life expectancy as other men of the same age. Most regain a good quality of life.
- Although these are encouraging statistics, continuing to worry about the effects of the treatment on quality of life, as well as fear of getting cancer again, can increase the risk of developing anxiety or depression.
- Effective treatments are available for anxiety and depression. With the right treatment, most people recover.
- It's important to take action early – the sooner the better.

References

- ¹ AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) & AACR (Australasian Association of Cancer Registries) (2012). *Cancer in Australia: an overview, 2012*. Cancer series no. 74. Cat. no. CAN 70. Canberra: AIHW.
- ² AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) & AACR (Australasian Association of Cancer Registries) 2012. *Cancer in Australia: an overview, 2012*. Cancer series no. 74. Cat. no. CAN 70. Canberra: AIHW.
- ³ Dahl, A. et al (2005). Study of anxiety disorder and depression in long-term survivors of testicular cancer. *Journal Clinical Oncology* 23(10): 2389-2395.

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our support service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Cancer Council Helpline

13 11 20 (Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm EST)

www.cancer.org.au

Information about cancer and where to go for support and help.

Andrology Australia

1300 303 878

www.andrologyaustralia.org

Information on male reproductive health and associated conditions, including testicular cancer.

Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

122.102.106.143/cancersurvivorship

Care, support, information and resources for Australian cancer survivors.

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.



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