



# Coping with waiting



## This information sheet provides suggestions for coping with the stress of waiting.

Waiting for your cancer test results, appointments, treatments or to hear if your treatment has been successful can be overwhelming. You may experience many emotions and it may feel like you are on a roller coaster or that life is out of control. The uncertainty and anxiety of waiting in this situation can be physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. It can be hard to concentrate on other things and often our mind can go into overdrive, sometimes imagining the worst.

## Why we have to wait

Waiting is part of getting your diagnosis and treatment. Test results take time. For example, tissue taken in a biopsy has to be analysed in a laboratory – this can take several days or a couple of weeks. Scans need to be studied carefully, often by a team of doctors, which can take a number of weeks. To offer you the best treatment options, your doctor needs as much information as possible about you and your cancer.

Ask your doctor to explain each step to you and when you can expect results.

It's a good idea to ask for a contact number to call if you haven't heard anything in the expected time. This can help if you're worrying about being "lost in the system".

Everyone's cancer is different. There is often a waiting time (usually 4-6 weeks) before you start chemotherapy or radiation treatment. You may worry that your cancer is growing while you are waiting for treatment. Talking to your doctors/nurses about your concerns can be reassuring. Cancers are often slow-growing taking years to develop.

## Waiting is hard

Sometimes, waiting can feel very lonely, even with the support of close family and friends. Often, people don't want

to burden others with how anxious they feel. Your family and friends may feel helpless about the best way to support you.

Tensions can easily rise as you wait and sometimes this can express itself in anger, being impatient, being short or withdrawing from those close to you. Recognize this is a difficult time for everyone.

"Waiting for my partner's biopsy result was awful. We tried to make time for each other and have at least part of the day full of normal things. I made an effort to cook a meal each night so we could sit and talk." Maria

## Some ways to cope with waiting

Ways of coping can include distraction and attention. Most people naturally do one of these more than the other:

- **Attention** involves focusing on the cause of the problem.
- **Distraction** is focusing on something other than the problem.

Ideally, you can find balance between attention and distraction.

### Focusing on the problem

Reminding yourself about why you have to wait can be reassuring. Set aside a limited time to worry, for example, 15 minutes. Write down your concerns and make a list of questions. When the time is up, stop and find something else to do.

Try making a list of statements that work for you, for example:

"I have to wait so they get the right information."

"Waiting for test results means I will get the right treatment."

"I can handle this."

### Focusing something other than the problem

Distraction can be useful when you need to cope with waiting and cannot get an answer right away. Keep yourself busy with activities or try meditation and relaxation.



Reciting a mantra or words of encouragement to yourself may be helpful. Some examples are:

- I am in charge of how I feel, and today I choose to feel calm and relaxed
- I can handle this one step at a time.
- I will breathe in confidence and breathe out doubt.
- I can find peace through prayer and meditation.
- I can find solutions to some things, accept what I can change and not pay attention to what I cannot change - like the serenity prayer.

## A breathing exercise to try

This is a simple breathing exercise that is short, easy to remember and you can do it anywhere. The exercise targets breathing and the tension we hold in our shoulders. People sometimes find it easier to close their eyes during this exercise but it's totally up to you.

In this exercise you are going to focus on slow, controlled but natural breathing.

First focus your attention on your breathing. Feel the air coming into your body and then leaving again.

Breathe in slowly while counting to three	1 - 2 - 3
Hold your breath while counting to three	1 - 2 - 3
Breathe out slowly while counting to three	1 - 2 - 3

Breathe out slowly and normally – do not force or blow your breath out.

Combine this with your shoulders. While you breathe, raise your shoulders, then hold for three seconds. Then as you breathe out for three seconds, also relax your shoulders. You might like to imagine warm water running down your back – gently soothing and softening the tension in your shoulders as you relax.

Repeat three to five times or until you feel relaxed.

## Some practical tips to help with waiting

### Collecting information and contact details

- Find out when to expect results of tests and appointments. Check how to get results, and who to call if you haven't received them.
- Make a list of your doctors, nurses and people who make the appointments (booking clerks) and their phone numbers, so you know who to contact if you have questions.

- Write down the questions you want to ask when you see the doctor (get a notebook to take along). Ask your local Cancer Society for the booklet *Questions you may wish to ask*.

### At your medical appointments

- Take a family member or friend with you to keep you company.
- Come prepared with something to do while you wait.
- Find a support person who will go with you to listen – four ears are better than two. This allows you to talk about the appointment afterwards with someone who also heard the information.
- Ask if you can have the oncologists email – this may be an easier way to contact them.

### Looking after yourself

- Take good care of yourself – eat well, exercise when you can and get sleep (talk to your general practitioner if sleeping is difficult).
- Leave a notebook by your bed. We think a lot at night and often questions pop into our heads that you can almost never remember when you wake in the morning. Writing them (or anything else) down when you think of them makes it easier to relax and sleep.
- Keep up normal activities and routine as much as you can – working, going to the gym or seeing friends.
- Use distraction – try to focus your attention on a project that you're keen to do. Distract yourself with movies, books, meditation, having a massage, cleaning, gardening, or try a relaxation technique (for example, the breathing exercise in this information sheet).
- Write down what you are worried about, work out the things you can do something about and try to accept the things you cannot change.