

Coping with cancer over the holiday season

For people with cancer, their families and friends

The holiday season can be difficult for people who have experienced a major change or loss in their life. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and sadness are common and holiday traditions can be painful reminders of how different life has become.

Janet Phillips, Manager of the Cancer Council Helpline, said the Helpline received hundreds of distressed calls from people affected by cancer during the holiday season. "This can be a very difficult time for people affected by cancer," Mrs Phillips said.

"We speak to patients who are fearful that this may be their last Christmas. Others may be worried that their feelings and emotions may ruin the celebrations for others. Some people are concerned they may experience frustrating delays in appointments, treatments and results over this period."

Mrs Phillips said family and friends finding it difficult to cope with Christmas without a loved one also called the Helpline.

"When people are facing Christmas without a loved one, this can bring forward overwhelming feelings of loss and grief," she said.

"As experienced cancer nurses, we are here to listen to people's cancer experiences and share emotional and practical support to help people cope with the feelings of sadness and sorrow."

Mrs Phillips encourages anyone finding it difficult to cope with cancer to call the Cancer Council Helpline on **13 11 20**.

Strategies from others affected by cancer

Sharing experiences and coping strategies can help people get through difficult times. Cancer Council Victoria spoke to patients, family and friends affected by cancer, as well as people coping with the loss of a loved one to find out how they coped with Christmas. Here are some of their suggestions:

Set realistic expectations

- Consider online shopping and/or gift vouchers for Christmas presents. This can save both time and energy.
- If you are experiencing financial issues, consider 'Kris Kringle' or making home-made gift vouchers for things such as babysitting, gardening, or a picnic.
- Booking Christmas lunch or dinner at a restaurant, arranging a picnic at a local park, or simply asking people to bring a contribution to the Christmas meal can reduce stress.
- If you are having treatment over Christmas, consider having a low key, restful day on December 25 and plan a celebration at the end of treatment.

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Express your needs

- Tell others if you are finding it difficult to cope and accept offers of help. Be specific about things people can do to assist.
- Practice being assertive and remember that you don't have to do anything that you don't want to – especially if you're not feeling up to it.

Be gentle with yourself

- Give yourself permission to get through Christmas the best way you can. Let people know that you may need to have a rest on the day. Try to accept any limitations and remember Christmas doesn't have to be perfect.
- Mood swings and feelings of loss are common over Christmas. Allow yourself some time to grieve and reflect.
- Have an exit plan prepared for times when you may find a family gathering or party overwhelming.

Keep activities simple and non-strenuous

- Fatigue is a common side effect after cancer treatment. Avoid overwhelming numbers of visitors and long car trips. As energy levels may fluctuate, sometimes it can be helpful to plan the day's activities and then halve them. Allow for rest time during the day.
- Keep meals simple. If the person with cancer has had to change their diet, serve food that can be enjoyed by everyone.

Create new rituals

- If your usual Christmas rituals or traditions are too painful, consider replacing them with a new ritual or tradition that is special to you. For example, you can light a candle in honour of a special person who has died and place it with a photo or flowers on the table.

Seek support

- Talking to someone about your feelings can reduce feelings of distress and isolation. Family and friends can be a good source of support.
- Churches or community centres sometimes hold Christmas services for those affected by cancer. Contact a local church or community centre for more information.
- If you need to talk to someone confidentially, call **13 11 20** and speak to one of our friendly and experienced cancer nurses on our Helpline. They can put you in touch with support services and listen to your concerns. We also recommend that you carry out-of-hours contacts for your treating doctor and hospital.
- Online support including blogs and forums are available 24 hours a day via **cancerconnections.com.au**. It is professionally moderated by Cancer Council staff and this will continue over the Christmas period.



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Services available over the holiday season

Ask a cancer nurse a question online at cancervic.org.au.

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Cancer Council Victoria's Helpline will close on public holidays and be available at the following times over Christmas and New Year:

Friday 23 Dec	8.30 am – 3 pm
Monday 26 Dec	Closed
Tuesday 27 Dec	Closed
Wednesday 28 Dec	10.00 am – 4 pm
Thursday 29 Dec	10.00 am – 4 pm
Friday 30 Dec	10.00 am – 4 pm
Monday 2 Jan	Closed

Answering machine messages will be checked at 10 am on the weekdays we are open. Please leave your name and phone number to have your call returned by a cancer nurse.

The Helpline will return to normal hours (Monday to Friday 9 am - 5 pm) on Tuesday 3 January 2012.

Other support services:

- Lifeline **13 11 14** (24 hour service)
- Grief Line **9596 7799** (12 pm – 3 am)
- Online support cancerconnections.com.au
- Your local GP
- Carers Victoria **1800 052 222**
- After hours carer crisis telephone counselling **1800 059 059**

