
Living with Anal Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'Living with anal cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

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Your feelings and anal cancer

Most people feel shocked and upset when they first find out they have cancer. You may feel numb, frightened and uncertain, confused, angry, resentful or guilty. Or you may feel totally different. Everyone reacts in their own way. Sometimes it is hard to take in the fact that you have cancer at all.

Upsetting feelings are a natural part of coming to terms with cancer. Your family and friends will probably have strong feelings too. Remember, you don't have to sort everything out at once.

Talking to others

Most people feel embarrassed talking about cancer of the anus at first. Our bowels, and going to the toilet, are very private matters. It is up to you who you tell. You may find it easier to talk once you have got over your initial shock.

Getting support

Your doctor or specialist nurse can put you in touch with specialist help if you need it. These people are there to help and want you to feel supported. So use them if you feel you need to.

To find out about counselling, look in the 'coping with cancer' section of CancerHelp UK. Or ask your doctor or nurse about local support groups. It may help to be in touch with someone who has been through what you are going through now.

Coping with a colostomy after anal cancer

If you have had a colostomy you will be given help to deal with it, both practically and emotionally. It will take time to get used to this change, but most people learn to do so. Your stoma nurse can provide help and support at all stages.



Your mood and body image

It is normal to feel worried about how you will look with a colostomy, and how others may react. You might find it helpful if a close family member is there while the stoma nurse teaches you to manage the colostomy. That way you can both get used to it and ask any questions you may have.

As you learn to manage your colostomy, its effect on your daily life should lessen. With time, doing everyday things will feel easier. If you feel low or depressed about your colostomy, you could contact your GP, your stoma nurse or one of the bowel cancer or colostomy organisations.

Job, sports and hobbies

Unless you do heavy manual work, your colostomy should not make any difference to your job. Ask your stoma nurse if you are unsure. Your colostomy will not stop you enjoying your favourite pastimes. Even strenuous exercise and swimming are possible. Once again, your stoma nurse can give you advice.

Sex and anal cancer

Effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy

Radiotherapy can make the skin around the anus and genitals very sore. So until your skin heals up, sexual intercourse is unlikely to be possible. Radiotherapy and chemotherapy can also have long term side effects for some people. For women this may mean an early menopause, or dryness and narrowing of the vagina. Men may find difficulty getting an erection after treatment.

Changes after surgery

You should not have sex for at least 6 weeks after major surgery. Occasionally an operation for anal cancer may affect the nerves to the sex organs. This can cause erectile difficulties for men and vaginal dryness and shrinkage for women.

Changes if you have a colostomy

If you have had a colostomy you may feel self conscious about the change in your body. It is natural to worry about how a colostomy will affect your relationship. You may also have practical worries about the bag smelling or being noticeable. It may help to talk to your stoma nurse.

Finding support

It will take time for you and your partner to come to terms with all that has happened. But talking it over and sharing your feelings usually helps. Your doctor or specialist nurse can also offer support, and perhaps suggest treatments for sexual problems. They can also put you in touch with a sex or relationships counsellor.

For detailed information about how to cope with the effects of cancer and its treatment on your sex life, look in the 'coping with cancer' section of CancerHelp UK.

Diet after anal cancer

Your digestion will take time to settle down after treatment for anal cancer. You may need to make some long term changes to your diet.

Diet after radiotherapy and chemotherapy

Radiotherapy makes the rectum irritated and inflamed. This often means you need to open your bowels frequently and



urgently. This should improve 3 to 4 weeks after the end of treatment. Chemotherapy can also give you diarrhoea and may make you feel sick. Your specialist nurse or doctor can suggest ways of coping and give you treatment to reduce side effects.

Diet after surgery

If part of your bowel is removed, it can make your stools less solid. This is because the bowel absorbs water as stools pass through. Some foods cause wind, which is difficult to control if you have had a colostomy. It will take a bit of experimenting to find out which foods upset your systems. Foods that often cause problems with wind include: very high fibre fruits and vegetables; onions and cabbage; fizzy drinks and beer; very rich or fatty foods. If you have difficulty with a particular food, cut it out for a while and try it again later.

What to ask your doctor about living with anal cancer

- Where can I get help dealing with my feelings?
- Do I have to pay for counselling?
- Who can answer my questions about living with my colostomy?
- When can I go back to work?
- Can I take up my usual sports, hobbies and activities again?
- Is there anyone I can talk to about treatment affecting my sex life?
- Can my partner talk to them too?
- What should I do if I have difficulty with my diet?
- Can I see a dietician here?
- What practical help is available?
- Can I get any help with money?
- Can anyone help me with claiming benefits?

Bowel cancer organisations

Cancer Research UK
 Main website: www.cancerresearchuk.org
 Patient information website:
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>
 Cancer Information Nurses phone: 020 7061 8355

Beating Bowel Cancer
 Tel: 08450 719300
 Advisory line: 08450 719301 (Mon to Thurs 9.00am to 5.30pm, Fri – 9am to 4pm)
 Website: www.beatingbowelcancer.org
 Nurse Email:
nurse@beatingbowelcancer.org

Bowel Cancer UK
 Tel: 0800 8 40 35 40 (Bowel cancer advisory service - Mon to Fri, 10am to 4pm)
 Tel: 020 7381 9711 (General enquiries)
 Website: www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk

The Colostomy Association
 Tel: 0118 939 1537
 Helpline: 0800 587 6744 or 0800 328 4257
 Website: www.colostomyassociation.org.uk

CORE
 Tel: 020 7486 0341
 Website: www.corecharity.org.uk
 Email: info@corecharity.org.uk
 This organisation used to be called the Digestive Disorders Foundation. They produce information and leaflets on common digestive diseases and illnesses, including bowel cancer.

Bladder and Bowel Foundation
 Tel: 01536 533255
 Website:
www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org
 Email: info@bladderandbowelfoundation.org



Notes

More information

For more information about anal cancer, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in October 2010. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2010. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).