

Looking after yourself

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can improve both physical and emotional well-being, especially during and following treatment for melanoma.



Read our tips for a good well-being plan which can restore some sense of control.

It is important to look after yourself during and following treatment for melanoma. Following a significant life event, such as melanoma diagnosis, a lot of people report that their priorities become more clearly focused, often with health and well-being rising to the top of the list.

For some people this may mean making big lifestyle changes, others find themselves making small ones, while other people focus on maintaining the healthy habits they had prior to diagnosis.

Here are some common healthy habits which will hopefully help you develop your well-being plan.

- **Keeping active** is beneficial for both your body and mind. Many people report that movement and exercise can reduce fatigue. It is recommended that people have at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise five days a week and 2-3 resistance sessions a week. If this is not your usual level of exercise – even small changes will make big difference. Aim to start small and build from there, for example choosing to walk instead of driving.

The best way to get active is to pick an enjoyable activity that involves movement, e.g. walking, birdwatching, gardening, dancing, cycling or swimming.

- **Eating well** will ensure that your body has fuel to do the things you need to do to live as well as you can. It may also boost your energy. Sometimes following melanoma diagnosis, it is tempting to try different diets claiming to have anti-cancer properties. However, the time, energy and limitations posed by these restrictive diets have significant impact on people's quality of life. In general, it is recommended to eat a balanced diet, consisting of fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, dairy, lean meat and fish. It is also important to stay hydrated by drinking 6-8 of glasses of water a day.

- **Resting is important**, especially during treatment. Allow yourself time to rest and recuperate. If needed, delegate the tasks that you can to others and allow yourself more time to rest. Most people have good and bad days when it comes to energy – listen to your body and do fewer things when low in energy. On your good days, you can do a bit more while you have higher energy levels, but be mindful not to do too much, as it may increase your fatigue the next day. Allow yourself a bit of trial and error until you find the right balance between resting and activity – especially when you are on treatment.

- **Sleep is important**, as this is the time your body heals. Aim to maintain your usual amount of sleep. Sometimes when going through stressful times, you may find your thoughts make it hard to fall asleep. If this is the case, it may be helpful to find a sleep routine that works for you. For example, cutting down caffeine in the afternoon, switching off electronics (e.g., phone, television, computer) an hour before bed, or snuggling with a book and a warm drink. Exercising (earlier in the day) can also help with sleep. Aim to get up at a regular time in the morning, regardless of when you went to sleep – this will help reset your sleep patterns. Lastly, expect not to be able to sleep well 1-2 nights before your scans. It is unlikely that the usual sleep strategies will work during these times of stress but rest assured that the sleep will return to your normal after you get the results.

- **Do what you enjoy.** It is important to have things to look forward to that put smile on your face. When feeling well, it could be helpful to make a list of all the things you enjoy, have enjoyed in the past or really want to try. When embarking on treatment, some people find it helpful to have a list of smaller, more manageable activities (e.g., favourite TV shows to catch up on) that they can enjoy when they are feeling tired or unwell.

- **Follow-up schedule.** One way to maintain a sense of control over melanoma is to follow medical recommendations about treatment and follow-up schedules. Sometimes people's fears and anxiety may urge them to seek medical follow up sooner than recommended or delay it. Speak to your Doctor about the signs and symptoms that you should look out for in relation to your melanoma and follow medical advice on what to do if you notice changes. It is also important to maintain your regular monitoring of other conditions and keep up with preventative measures (e.g., screening, vaccinations), as recommended by your General Practitioner.

What if I do not have time, motivation or energy to look after myself?

When people go through stressful times, such as melanoma diagnosis and treatment, it is common that healthy habits are harder to maintain and fall to the bottom of a lengthy "to do" list. The things to do during these times include:

- Remember that everyone experiences wavering motivation, especially during times of stress, and it is not a sign that you are not coping.
- Allow yourself to do things that are in line with your reduced capacity (e.g., go for a walk rather than a run).
- Plan to do a pleasant activity after any difficult ones to reward yourself.
- Break up tasks into smaller steps and allow yourself to complete fewer steps than you usually would.
- Schedule both routine and pleasant activities in your diary. Having things down on paper will increase your accountability.
- Do activities with someone else.
- If your lack of motivation persists longer than several days, consider seeking additional help. Some options include attending a support group with people who are having similar experiences, speaking to your doctor and speaking to a counsellor or psychologist.

PATIENT RESOURCES

- Melanoma Institute Australia's 'Self-care and support' booklet: melanoma.org.au/for-patients/patient-support
- Cancer Council's 'Nutrition for People Living with Cancer' booklet: cancer.org.au/assets/pdf/nutrition-and-cancer-booklet
- Search 'Move your body' on Cancer Council's website: cancer.org.au