

How to cope with fear of melanoma returning



In this fact sheet we provide practical strategies and resources to help you cope with the fear of melanoma returning.

The fear of melanoma coming back or progressing is very common following a melanoma diagnosis. The intensity of these fears can range from an occasional thought at the back of one's mind, to pervasive thoughts that leave no room for thinking about anything else.

Why do I keep worrying about melanoma?

From the moment that melanoma is diagnosed, there are a lot of questions that go through people's minds, such as:

- Will the treatment work for me?
- Will the melanoma come back or get worse?
- Will my next scan be clear?
- How long will the treatment work for?

Melanoma diagnosis, treatment and survivorship come with a lot of uncertainty. Our brains tend to focus on the worst-case scenario as a way to protect us, helping us feel prepared if it happens or relieved if it doesn't.

It can be frustrating to experience these fears and worries over and over again. Some people think about melanoma coming back or spreading all the time. Some people rarely think about their melanoma, but a news story about cancer or a chronic illness can trigger hours or even days of worry, making it hard to focus on anything else.

At times not being able to control these fears makes people consider whether they are coping well, whether they will ever stop worrying, and whether they will be able to enjoy life like before the diagnosis. These thoughts only contribute to their distress.

If this describes your experience, it may be helpful to know the periods of time where uncertainty is more common, which can include:

- waiting for the results of a recent biopsy or scan
- receiving a melanoma diagnosis
- weighing up your treatment options or starting a new treatment regime
- noticing and experiencing any adverse effects of treatment
- completing your treatment regime or attending your scheduled follow-up appointments
- when feeling unwell or noticing any changes in your body.

Strategies to manage your anxiety

As these transition points often raise a lot of questions and uncertainty, expecting your fears and worries to flare up during these times may reduce some of this distress, making it feel more manageable. You can also plan activities to get your mind off melanoma during these periods (e.g., watching a favourite movie, listening to enjoyable music, sharing a meal with loved ones, or seeking additional social support).

Other strategies that may be helpful for you include:

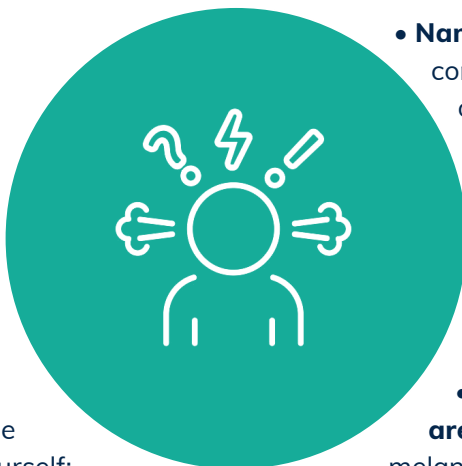
- **Following your medical practitioner's recommendations about your follow-up care.**

Perhaps your fears and worries want you to see doctors sooner or later than recommended, which is often not helpful – so it helps to remember that these recommendations are based on the best research and evidence.

- Usually, these fears will increase when there is uncertainty. Ask yourself: What am I uncertain about? What do I need more information about? **Write these down and see whether your medical practitioner can provide you with some additional information that will reduce your uncertainty.**

- **Talking to your treatment team about your prognosis** and the actual risk of recurrence. There are now sophisticated tools available for your medical practitioner to calculate your personal risk based on your melanoma's individual characteristics.

- **Knowing the signs of recurrence.** Sometimes every ache or pain can result in a worry that melanoma is back or has spread, so it is helpful to know exactly what to look for and how often to perform a self-examination.



- **Name it to tame it.** Distress can come from trying to push away or avoid emotions. When this happens, the emotions tend to grow even larger in our minds. When we acknowledge and name them, these fears and worries will appear more manageable.

- **Engaging in activities that are important to you.** Having melanoma always on your mind makes it hard to focus on other things, which can decrease your motivation to do things during the day. Having a lot of time to ponder about melanoma and the future will intensify your fears and worries. Doing things that are important to you and that you enjoy can help take your mind off melanoma, and you might even find yourself getting a break from thinking about it.

Seeking professional help

If fears about your melanoma are affecting your relationships and daily life, it might help to seek professional support – usually from a psychologist or a counsellor. Speak to your GP or melanoma treatment team for referral.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We have additional supportive care resources on the MIA website (melanoma.org.au/for-patients/patient-support):

- Download our *Self-Care and Support Booklet* and *Support Services Directory*.
- Watch our patient support video series, *Melanoma Matters*.