

Feeling Irritable

People with cancer and their family members are under a great deal of pressure to cope effectively with the treatments, side effects, and anxieties that accompany a diagnosis of cancer. Irritability is a common symptom of anxiety that can cause us to lash out at people close to us or makes us easily annoyed at others and situations. If you are concerned that you find you are more irritable or short with people and situations, please know that this is a normal reaction to being under stress and not feeling well. Chances are this is a short-term problem that will resolve itself as you begin to feel better.

Irritability can come in two different forms: “physically close” and “emotionally close” irritability. Physically close irritation may come from feeling more anxious in crowds or around others. When we are highly stressed, we can become easily irritated if people (especially strangers or people outside the family) are in our personal space or irritated by something they are doing (talking loud, chewing gum, etc.).

Emotionally close irritation can come from our perceptions of those who are close to us. You may be upset if you see an expression in your loved one’s face or worried that they are somehow judging your actions and emotions. You may become more sensitive than you were before cancer and feel as if you are being criticized – which most likely is not the case. People’s reactions will differ and will probably vary over time. But please know that you are not alone and that feeling irritable is your body and your emotions way of telling you that you are anxious.

Anger is also a normal and healthy response to having cancer. Expressing anger in a productive and thoughtful manner can prevent emotions from building up and potentially leading to more serious emotional problems such as hostility, responsibility and inconsiderate impulses. Open communication with those around will help you to not keep all your emotions pent up inside leading to burst of negative emotions.

What Can You Do to Manage Irritability?

- Give yourself a break. It’s okay to feel irritable sometimes and sometimes others around us who are anxious and worried may be irritable with us.
- Talk with your family, friends, doctor, nurse, and/or oncology social worker about what you are feeling. Don’t let things build up until you feel like you will explode with anger.
- Take a break. Find ways to relax and regroup. Learn to recognize the signs and either walk away or find some time to take a few deep breaths.
- Apologize quickly. None of us like being upset and generally we don’t intend to be mean or hurtful.
- Join a support group to hear how other people are managing their emotions.
- Seek professional help from a therapist experienced in working with cancer patients.
- Talk with your physician or therapist about medication that can ease depression and anxiety.
- Try stress relieving activities such as meditation, yoga, or Tai Chi.
- Use humor – find something to laugh about every day.
- Many people have shared that prayer is a useful tool in managing the roller coaster of emotions.
- Keep a journal to record and release your feelings.