

Coping with Cancer and its Side Effects

Narrator

Linda's love of tennis is surpassed only by her love of life... a life threatened with the diagnosis of cancer.

Linda, Patient

"I told the doctor, if this is going to interfere with my tennis, I don't want to do it. I also told them if it wasn't going to be fun, I wasn't going to do it. And he just looked at me like I was crazy.

And I didn't want to really go through chemo. So I wanted to know what my options were. So if I didn't take treatment, how long would I have. And my doctor said '2 to 3 weeks', so I said, 'O.K. I'll take the chemo.' It's only going to be 6 months. Well, it ended up being a year, and I've been in remission 32 months. 32 months now.

In the beginning, I mean I cried and cried and cried and cried, and I mean I couldn't sleep, and I had nightmares, and I thought I'd rather be dead than alive.

You literally felt like someone was taking a giant eraser every day and erasing pieces of you as your hair fell out, as your eyebrows fell out, I mean, there was no face.

I've been journaling... I'm a writer, and I've been journaling since I was 10, 15 years old, so I have stacks of journals like this tall, and I shredded every last one of them.

This was a new chapter in my life, and all those things that happened to me before were no longer going to be applicable to how I lived whatever life I was going to have left.

Part of the chemo cycle is depression. You're going to cry. You're going to get depressed. And being a single independent woman, I hated it when that happened, so I thought I was going crazy. It wasn't until 5 months later that I found out the drugs that they were giving me is what was causing that, so I researched those drugs and talked to the psychologist who was assigned to me, and we reduced some of the drugs, we dropped some of the drugs, we changed some of the drugs, and slowly but surely it balanced you out. It started balancing out.

And I think that's how you can empower yourself is to learn. I've seen so many of the people, of the patients lose their spirit. If you lose your spirit, you lose it all. You can't do it without your spirit.

When I finally started looking at the treatment as my ally and not my enemy, things started becoming easier. But if you look at the chemo as something that's going to hurt you, or something that's going to make you sick, or something that's going to make you throw up, and something that's going to make you have diarrhea 24 hours a day for a week, you know, then that's all you think about it. Then it's not going to do your spirit any good. And when I realized that it was my ally, it was my friend, I looked forward to chemo."

Coping with Cancer and its Side Effects

Carmen Escalante, MD

"Many patients experience some side effects as a result of cancer treatment, or symptoms due to the cancer itself. Although there are some patients who don't experience any side effects, others may experience one or more.

Side effects might include mental and physical fatigue, pain, fever and infection, bowel irritation, nausea and vomiting, mouth sores, sexual side effects, emotional issues, hair loss, skin and nail problems. Any of these sound familiar? Well, you are not alone. These symptoms are not unusual. Most are limited to the time you're in treatment... whether your treatment involves chemotherapy, radiation, surgery or other therapies. Many cancer patients experience the same sorts of things. There are a lot of fears and misconceptions patients have about the fact that they are experiencing side effects.

For example, many patients fear that if they are experiencing symptoms their cancer is getting worse or recurring. These symptoms do not necessarily mean that your cancer is worsening or that the cancer is coming back. Another common misconception is that if you mention your symptoms to your doctor, your treatment may be changed, delayed or stopped as a result. Not necessarily. Your treatment plan is based on many different factors. You may be afraid to mention your symptoms because you are unsure of yourself or how to express what is going on with your body. Some patients even express the fear that they feel they are "going crazy", and that they will not be taken seriously by their doctor or nurse. These are all common fears and concerns that many other patients have.

The important thing to realize is that if you are having symptoms that are not being relieved, you must discuss this with your physician. Make the doctor and nurse aware of how you are tolerating treatment. Ask if it is appropriate to have a consult with another health care professional on the team, such as a pain specialist, dietitian, or physical therapist. M. D. Anderson has many resources from the Fatigue Clinic to the Pain Clinic and much more where symptom management specialists can help you.

Your symptoms CAN be managed. Whether with medications, changes in dietary habits, physical therapy, counseling, or some other means, your symptoms CAN be managed. And for many patients, participating in the management of symptoms can be very empowering.

Linda, Patient

"Whenever the chemo came, whatever symptoms I had, side effects I had by chemo, I would write them down, discuss them with my doctor, and decide whether we wanted to cut them down or reduce them.

Talk to somebody. You can ask, you can ask your doctor to assign someone to you. You can ask... there's a support group here at M. D. Anderson.

Coping with Cancer and its Side Effects

Live each moment. You know, if you feel bad that moment, you know go find somebody that day. Don't wait the next day or the next day. You know whether it be a friend, a parent, chaplain, whatever.

Take it as it comes without the doctor bits. You know, 'There's a good chance you're going to make it BUT this and this and this can happen.' You know, they have to tell you that.

But If you try to enjoy the day, each moment, and live out loud, live that day, celebrate the moment, instead of worrying about what happened yesterday or what's going to happen tomorrow, that would be my advice."