This information sheet has been written to provide you with ways of coping with the stress of waiting. Waiting for cancer test results, appointments, to start treatment or to hear if treatment has been successful can be overwhelming and you can feel out of control. It is as if time has stood still and you can’t move forward. The uncertainty and anxiety of waiting in this situation can be as bad as physical pain. It is hard to concentrate on other things and often our mind goes into overdrive, sometimes imagining the worst.

Why we have to wait

Waiting is part of getting your diagnosis and treatment. Tests results take time. For example, tissue taken in a biopsy has to be analysed in a laboratory - this can take several days or longer. Scans need to be studied carefully, often by a team of doctors which can take a number of weeks. To offer you the best treatment options your doctor needs as much information as possible about you and your cancer.

Ask your doctor to explain each step to you and when you can expect results.

It’s a good idea to ask for a contact number to call if you haven’t heard anything in the expected time. This can help if you’re worrying about being “lost in the system”.

Everyone’s cancer is different. There is often a waiting time, a few weeks, before you start chemotherapy or radiation treatment. You may worry that your cancer is growing while you are waiting for treatment. Talking to your doctors/nurses about your concerns can be reassuring. Cancers are often slow-growing taking years to develop.

Waiting is hard

Sometimes, waiting can feel very lonely, even with the support of close family and friends. Often, people don’t want to burden others with how anxious they feel. Your family and friends may feel helpless about the best way to support you.

Tensions can easily arise as you wait and sometimes this can express itself in anger, or being impatient with those close to you. Recognize this is a difficult time for you and others.

“Waiting for my partner’s biopsy result was awful. We tried to make time for each other and have at least part of the day full of normal things. I made an effort to cook a meal each night so we could sit and talk.”

Maria

Some ways to cope with waiting

Ways of coping can include distraction and attention. Using either or both of these can be useful. Most people naturally do one of these more than the other:

• Attention involves focusing on the cause of the problem.
• Distraction is focusing on something other than the problem.

Ideally, we can find balance between attention and distraction.

Focusing on the problem

Reminding yourself about why you have to wait can be reassuring. Set aside a limited time to worry, for example, 15 minutes. Write down your concerns and make a list of questions. When the time is up, stop and find something else to do.

Try making a list of statements that work for you, for example:

“I have to wait so they get the right information.”

“Waiting for test results means I will get the right treatment.”

“I can handle this.”
COPING WITH WAITING

CANCER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND • TE KĀHU MATEPUKUPUKU O AOTEAROA

For cancer information and support phone 0800 CANCER (226 237) or go to www.cancernz.org.nz

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Focusing on something other than the problem

Distraction can be useful when you need to cope with waiting and cannot get an answer right away.

Keep yourself busy with activities or try meditation and relaxation.

A breathing exercise to try

This is a simple breathing exercise that is short, easy to remember and you can do it anywhere. The exercise targets breathing and the tension we hold in our shoulders. People sometimes find it easier to close their eyes during this exercise but it’s totally up to you.

In this exercise you are going to focus on slow, controlled but natural breathing.

First focus your attention on your breathing. Feel the air coming into your body and then leaving again.

Breathe in slowly for a count of 3 1 - 2 - 3
Hold the breathe for a count of 3 1 - 2 - 3
Breathe out slowly for a count of 3 1 - 2 - 3
Breathe out slowly and normally - do not force or blow your breath out.

Combine this with your shoulders. For the first three counts raise your shoulders, then hold for a count of three, then, as you breathe out for three counts also relax your shoulders. You might like to imagine warm water running down your back - gently soothing and softening the tension in your shoulders as you relax.

Repeat three to five times or until you feel relaxed.

Some practical tips to help with waiting:

Gathering information and contact details

- Find out when to expect results of tests and appointments. Check how to get results, and who to call if you haven’t received them.

- Make a list of your doctors, nurses and people who make the appointments (booking clerks) and their phone numbers, so you know who to contact if you have questions.

- Write down the questions you want to ask when you see the doctor (get a notebook to take along). Ask your local Cancer Society for the booklet Questions you may wish to ask.

At your medical appointments

- Take a family member or friend with you to keep you company.

- Come prepared with something to do while you wait.

- Find a support person who will go with you to listen - four ears are better than two. This allows you to discuss the appointment afterwards with someone who also heard the information.

Looking after yourself

- Take good care of yourself - eat well, exercise when you can, get sleep (talk to your GP if sleeping is difficult).

- Leave a notebook by your bed, we think a lot at night and often questions pop into our heads which you can almost never remember when you wake in the morning. Writing them (or anything else) down when you think of them makes it easier to relax and sleep.

- Keep up normal activities and routine as much as you can - working, going to the gym or seeing friends

- Use distraction - try to focus your attention on a project that you’re keen to do. Distract yourself with DVDs, books, meditation, having a massage or try a relaxation technique, for example, the breathing exercise on this page.

- Write down what you are worried about, work out the things you can do something about and try to accept the things you cannot change.

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