

Living with Bowel Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'Living with bowel cancer'. You will find more detailed information on our website. In this information there are sections on

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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Coping with bowel cancer

It can be very difficult coping with a diagnosis of bowel cancer, both practically and emotionally. You may feel very upset and confused at first. As well as coping with the fear and anxiety that a diagnosis of cancer brings, you have to work out how to manage practically. There may be money matters to sort out. Who do you tell you have cancer? There may be children or grandchildren to consider.

Our coping with cancer section contains lots of information you may find helpful. There are sections about

- Your feelings
- Talking to people- who and what to tell
- Talking to children
- How you can help yourself
- Who else can help you
- Sex and sexuality
- Coping financially including information about benefits and sick pay, mortgages, pensions, loans and insurance

Your feelings and bowel cancer

When people first find out they have bowel cancer they may feel a range of emotions. All sorts of feelings are likely to come and go. Your family and friends will probably have strong feelings too.

You may feel isolated and find it difficult to talk to people. It is not unusual to feel embarrassed about having cancer of the bowel or rectum at first. Our bowels and going to the toilet are very private matters for many people. It is up to you who you tell.

There is a lot of support available. You may find it easier to talk to someone outside your immediate family and friends. You could find a support group or join online support websites like Cancer Chat <http://cancerchat.cancerresearchuk.org/>

It is quite common nowadays for people to have counselling after cancer treatment. To find out more about counselling, look in the coping with cancer section of our website. Or you could contact one of the bowel cancer organisations.

Coping with a stoma after bowel cancer

Some people have a colostomy or ileostomy as part of their treatment for bowel cancer. In these operations the end of the bowel is brought out into an opening on the abdomen. The opening is called a stoma. It can take a while to get used to dealing with a stoma but there is a lot of support available. Your stoma nurse can help by giving advice and support.

As you learn to manage your stoma, it should have less and less impact on your day to day life. With time, things like going to work, going out socially and taking part in sports and hobbies will feel easier.

It is normal to feel worried about how you look, and how other people may react. There can be practical worries about the bag being noticeable, or smelling. Or you may have emotional worries about your friends or partner rejecting you. Stoma bags are very well designed. They cannot be seen through your clothes and should not smell or leak. If you do notice any smell or leakage, talk to your stoma nurse. You may need a different type or make of bag.

Many people find that if they talk openly to close family and friends their fears of rejection disappear. Most people want to understand what is happening so that they can help.

Sex and bowel cancer

Most people are able to have a normal sex life after having bowel cancer. You will need time to get over surgery, or any other treatment. You should not have sex for at least 6 weeks after major surgery.

Many people don't feel like sex while they are having treatment. Side effects and general tiredness are bound to get in the way. If you have had a colostomy or ileostomy you may also feel self conscious about the change in your body.

You will probably find that talking things over with your partner can help. You may prefer to talk to a specialist counsellor, either alone or with your partner.

Sometimes, radiotherapy or an operation to the rectum can affect the nerves to the sex organs. A man may not be able to get, or keep, an erection. A woman may find that sex feels different from before the treatment, and may have vaginal dryness and pain. Women may also find after radiotherapy that their vagina shrinks slightly and gets narrower.

These effects do not affect everyone who has bowel cancer treatment and they may get better over time. Occasionally, the changes can be permanent. There is more information about sex, sexuality and cancer in our coping with cancer section.

Diet after bowel cancer

You may need to change your diet after treatment for bowel cancer. You will find that your digestion takes time to settle down whatever treatment you have had.

Diet after surgery

The large bowel (colon) normally absorbs water as the stool passes through. So if you have had part of your large bowel removed, your stool may become less solid. If you have had a large part of your colon removed you may have diarrhoea. Let your doctor or nurse know if this happens, as they can give you medicine to help control it.

Particular foods may upset the way your bowel works and you may need to experiment with your diet to find out which they are. If you have problems you can ask to see a dietician.

Diet after radiotherapy

Radiotherapy to the bowel often causes diarrhoea. This can take a few weeks to settle down after treatment has finished. Your doctor can give you tablets to help control the diarrhoea.

Diet and chemotherapy

Chemotherapy for bowel cancer can give you diarrhoea and may make you feel sick. These side effects will disappear after your treatment is over. You can gradually get back to a normal diet.

What to ask your doctor about living with bowel cancer

- How long will it take me to get over my treatment?
- When can I go back to work and take up my usual sports, hobbies and activities again?
- Where can I get help to deal with my feelings and emotions?
- Do I have to pay for counselling?
- Who can help me look after my stoma?
- How do I get the supplies I need for my stoma? Are these available on prescription?
- Is there anyone who can give advice or support about treatment affecting my sex life?
- What should I do if I have problems with my diet?
- Can I see a dietician at this hospital?
- What practical support is available?
- Can I get any help with money problems, including claiming benefits?

Bowel cancer organisations

Cancer Research UK

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer
Cancer Information Nurses phone: 0808 800 4040

Beating Bowel Cancer

Nurse advisory line Tel: 0208 973 0011 (Mon to Thur, 9am to 5.30pm - Fri, 9am to 4pm)
Website: www.beatingbowelcancer.org
Nurse Email: nurse@beatingbowelcancer.org

Bowel Cancer UK

Tel: 020 7940 1760
Website: www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk

The Colostomy Association

Helpline: 0800 328 4257 (24 hrs a day, 7 days a week)
Website: www.colostomyassociation.org.uk

IA - The ileostomy and internal pouch support group

Freephone: 0800 018 4724
Email: info@iasupport.org
Website: www.iasupport.org

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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