

Steadying The What-ifs: Health Conversation Guide



Suggestions to help you discuss worries about cancer risk or recurrence with your healthcare team.



This guide is here to help you prepare conversations about worries surrounding cancer or recurrence with your healthcare team. It suggests topics and questions you might like to raise, so you can explore strategies and options that feel right for you.

Not every topic will be relevant to your situation, and that's okay. Talk about what matters most to you right now.

Support needs are not linear. What feels helpful one day might change the next. Conversations with healthcare professionals can also be time-limited or complex, so consider:

- Bringing someone with you for support
- Taking notes or recording (with permission)
- Asking for visual explanations if that's easier to follow

Some ideas may work better than others, so give yourself permission to try different approaches.

Knowing Your Risk



Each person will have different risks for cancer or cancer recurrence. **Having an idea of your actual individual risk of cancer is important in managing any worry you may have.** Your specialist is the best person to talk to about cancer recurrence. It is good to know if there are ways to manage your risk of recurrence.

Knowing Your "Normal"



Knowing your own body and the sorts of 'normal' aches and pains you feel is important. Talk to your healthcare team about how to distinguish what is normal for you, they may be able to provide information about what to look out for. Don't be afraid to see a doctor if you have concerns. Knowing what is normal for you both physically and mentally can help.

Psychological Support



Looking after your mental health often means drawing on different kinds of support at different times. This might include talking with family and friends, or reaching out to a counsellor or psychologist. Each plays a valuable role: friends and loved ones can listen and walk alongside you, while professionals are trained to help you unpack worries and build coping strategies.



Support needs are not linear. Some days a light chat may be enough, while other times a deeper conversation with a professional can feel more helpful. Asking your GP about a mental health care plan can also give you access to subsidised sessions with a psychologist or counsellor. Having a range of options makes it easier to match the support to what you need in that moment.

What You Can Control



Many in our community find that taking small, proactive steps helps ease worry. While some things will always be outside your control, it can help to focus on what you can influence. This might include being physically active, keeping up with appointments, eating well, limiting alcohol or smoking, practising relaxation, or seeking out helpful information.

You also have control over when and how you reach for support and information. Do it in your own time, in the way that feels right for you.

Accessing Support



There are several publicly funded options to access allied health and mental health support services. There are also patient support groups and advocacy organisations who provide free support. It is good to ask your healthcare team or GP about what you can access for free and what is also available at a cost so you can weigh up your options.

Medications, Screening, & Follow-Up



Your healthcare team can advise you on the follow-up schedule and screenings that are right for you. Ask if there are medications that may lower your risk of recurrence, and discuss how often you should be monitored.

When discussing these options, you might find it helpful to bring someone with you for support. Some people prefer to group appointments together, while others spread them out. You may also want to consider timing appointments around anniversaries or life events to make them feel more manageable.

Treatment Side Effects



Side effects from treatment can add to both the physical and emotional load if they are not well managed. Talk openly with your healthcare team about anything you are experiencing, including possible long-term effects, and ask about ways to ease or prevent them.

Acknowledging Your Worry & Recognising Needs



Worrying thoughts can come in waves. They may feel stronger around anniversaries, during check-ups, when new symptoms appear, or when someone close to you is diagnosed. Everyone responds differently: some people avoid talking about it, others seek reassurance, and many shift between the two.

Your healthcare team can help by listening, offering practical reassurance, and suggesting strategies or support services. It may also help to talk with them about resetting expectations and goals for yourself during times when worry feels heavier.

Support Spaces and Services



Support needs can change over time, and it can help to explore the different services available to you. This might include support groups (online or in person), educational events, peer support programs, or local services. Talk with your healthcare team about whether your support needs have shifted, and what options might be most helpful now.

Remember, you can move in and out of support spaces depending on what feels right at the time. For inherited cancer risk, ICA's Inherited Cancer Support Service offers access to a qualified genetic counsellor, and our Peer Support Program connects you with a trained mentor. Many cancer charities also facilitate support groups, and the Cancer Council Helpline (13 11 20) provides free and confidential support.

Relationships and Support



Relationships can feel complicated when living with cancer or inherited risk. At times, others may not fully understand how or why you are feeling a certain way. You might choose to share some information and keep other parts private. It is also natural to worry about the impact on family members, or to feel that if you are unwell, someone else may need to take on more responsibility.

Healthcare professionals can help you explore ways to manage these concerns, whether through counselling, family support services, or referrals to relationship specialists. Finding the right kind of support and referrals to services can make it easier to care for your loved ones while also caring for yourself.

Knowing What's on the Horizon



Many people feel more at ease when they understand what new research, treatments, or preventive options are available. If this feels helpful for you, ask your healthcare team to guide you towards trusted information and explain how it applies to your situation.



Conversation Checklist for Your GP or healthcare team

Think about the topics on this list before your appointment, then bring your answers along to your appointment to guide the conversation. Not every item will apply to you, so focus on what feels most relevant.

	Ask Yourself	Ask Your GP or Healthcare Team
Main Worries and Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is worrying me most right now? (recurrence, diagnosis, general what-ifs, specific symptoms, scanxiety)• How often do these thoughts come up?• Do they interfere with sleep, daily life, or relationships?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I’ve been feeling [describe]. What options are there for support?”• “Could I get a referral to a psychologist, counsellor, or support program?”
Risk & What’s Normal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I know what is “normal” for my body, and what changes feel unusual?• Have I noticed any new or concerning symptoms?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “What is my individual risk of cancer or recurrence?”• “Can we go through these symptoms together?”• “What changes or symptoms should I monitor, and when should I book an appointment?”
Screening, Follow-ups & Medications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I up to date with follow-up appointments and screenings?• Have I been told about any medications that could reduce my risk?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Can we review my follow-up plan?”• “Should I be taking (or considering) any medications for prevention or risk reduction?”
Treatment Side Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I experiencing any treatment side effects now?• Do I know if there are long-term impacts I should prepare for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “How can I better manage my current side effects?”• “Are there long-term effects I should expect, and what can we do about them?”



	Ask Yourself	Ask Your GP or Healthcare Team
Lifestyle & Self-Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I keeping active, eating well, sleeping enough, and managing stress?• Which of these feels harder for me right now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “What lifestyle changes would be most effective for me in managing risk and easing worry?”• “Are there safe and practical activities or nutrition programs I can be referred to?”
Accessing Supports & Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What kinds of support have I tried so far?• Do I prefer peer groups, one-on-one professional support, or self-guided resources?• Do my needs shift depending on where I’m at?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “What free or subsidised services can I access?”• “Are there advocacy organisations, programs or local services you recommend?”
Family & Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How has cancer (or risk) affected my relationships or family roles?• Do I feel changes in my confidence, body image, sexuality, or sense of self?• Am I worried about passing risk to my children or family members?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Who can I talk to about relationship, family, or body-image concerns?”• “Can you refer me to family counsellors, fertility specialists, or services for inherited cancer risk?”
Information Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I want more information about research, statistics, or treatment advances?• Do I find this kind of knowledge reassuring, or does it add to my worry?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Where can I find reliable updates about my condition, genetic risk, or recurrence?”• “How can I get this information in a way that feels useful, not overwhelming?”