

Coping with cancer over Christmas

Celebrating Christmas can be difficult for people who have experienced a major change or loss in their life. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and sadness are common and Christmas traditions can be painful reminders of how different life has become.

Edwina Beddoes, Senior Cancer Nurse on the Cancer Council Helpline, said the helpline received hundreds of distressed calls from people affected by cancer over Christmas and New Year.

“This can be a very difficult time for people affected by cancer,” Ms Beddoes said.

“We speak to patients who are fearful that this may be their last Christmas. Others may be worried that their feelings and emotions may ruin the celebrations for others.”

Ms Beddoes said family and friends finding it difficult to cope with Christmas without a loved one also called the helpline.

“When people are facing Christmas without a loved one, this can bring forward overwhelming feelings of loss and grief,” she said.

“As experienced cancer nurses, we are here to listen to people’s cancer experiences and share emotional and practical support to help people cope with the feelings of sadness and sorrow.”

Ms Beddoes encourages anyone finding it difficult to cope with cancer to call the Cancer Council Helpline on **13 11 20**.

Strategies from others affected by cancer

Sharing experiences and coping strategies can help people get through difficult times. Ms Beddoes spoke to patients, family and friends affected by cancer, as well as people coping with the loss of a loved one to find out how they coped with Christmas. Here are some of their suggestions:

Set realistic expectations

- Consider online shopping and/or gift vouchers for Christmas presents. This can save both time and energy.
- If you are experiencing financial issues, consider ‘Kris Kringle’ or making home-made gift vouchers for things such as babysitting, gardening, or a picnic.

- Booking Christmas lunch or dinner at a restaurant, arranging a picnic at a local park, or simply asking people to bring a contribution to the Christmas meal can reduce stress.
- If you are having treatment over Christmas, consider having a low key day on December 25 and plan a celebration at the end of treatment.

Express your needs

- Tell others if you are finding it difficult to cope and accept offers of help. Be specific about things people can do to assist.

Be gentle with yourself

- Give yourself permission to get through Christmas the best way you can. Let people know that you may need to have a rest on the day. Try to accept any limitations and remember Christmas doesn't have to be perfect.
- Mood swings and feelings of loss are common over Christmas. Allow yourself some time to grieve and reflect.
- Have an exit plan prepared for times when you may find a family gathering or party overwhelming.

Keep activities simple and non-strenuous

- Fatigue is a common side effect after cancer treatment. Avoid overwhelming numbers of visitors and long car trips. As energy levels may fluctuate, sometimes it can be helpful to plan the day's activities and then halve them. Allow for rest time during the day.
- Keep meals simple. If the person with cancer has had to change their diet, serve food that can be enjoyed by everyone.

Create new rituals

- If your usual Christmas rituals or traditions are too painful, consider replacing with a new ritual or tradition that is special to you. For example, you can light a candle in honour of a special person who has died and place it with a photo or flowers on the table.

Seek support

- Talking to someone about your feelings can reduce feelings of distress and isolation. Family and friends can be a good source of support.
- If you need to talk to someone anonymously, the cancer nurses on our

helpline can listen to your concerns and put you in touch with support services. Call **13 11 20** to speak to a cancer nurse today. We also recommend that you carry out of hour contacts for your treating doctor and hospital.

- Online support including blogs and forums is available at www.cancerconnections.com.au. You can also ask a cancer nurse a question at www.cancervic.org.au.

Helpline Support

The Cancer Council Helpline, **13 11 20**, will be available at the following times over Christmas and the New Year:

Thursday 24 December:	8.30am-3pm
Friday 25 December:	Closed
Monday 28 December:	Closed
Tuesday 29 December:	10.00am-4pm
Wednesday 30 December:	10.00am-4pm
Thursday 31 December:	10.00am-4pm
Friday 1 January:	Closed

Answering machine messages will be checked every weekday that we are closed. To have your call returned, please leave your name and phone number.

The helpline will return to normal hours (Monday to Friday 8.30am-6pm) on Monday 4 January 2010.

Other support services:

Lifeline **13 11 14**

Online support www.cancerconnections.com.au