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Coping with Cancer After a Natural Disaster: Frequently Asked Questions for People With Cancer and Their Caregivers

Living through natural disasters like major weather events, hurricanes, or wildfires can be stressful, especially during the [COVID-19¹](#) pandemic. The usual evacuation procedures and shelter locations, as well as their availability in your community, county, or state, will likely be different during the pandemic.

People in areas affected by natural disasters who need guidance from the American Cancer Society should call our National Cancer Information Center at 1-800-227-2345.

If you (or a loved one) have cancer and have had to evacuate your home or treatment center, or if your treatment plan has been changed due to a recent natural disaster, you may have trouble getting the cancer care you need. It's also important to remember that state, county, and local rules related to COVID-19 vary. The following questions and answers can help you figure out what you need to do and how to take care of yourself.

Cancer treatment

Q. What do I need to do first?

A: If you're in a temporary shelter, remember rules about social distancing and face coverings might be different from what you're used to at home. If possible, call shelters ahead of time to know what rules are in place. It's a good idea to find out if there are health care professionals on site.

If there are health care professionals on site, meet with them right away. Let them know that you have been getting cancer treatment and that you need to be put in contact with a doctor or hospital as soon as possible. If you will need a ride to get there, be sure to let them know this, too.

If there are no health care professionals at the temporary shelter or housing, ask the shelter director, landlord, or person you're staying with to help put you in touch with a local hospital, or call the American Cancer Society and we will help you. Our number is 1-800-227-2345. If 1-800 numbers aren't working, look up the local American Cancer Society office number.

Q. What should I do if I have an emergency?

A: Get treatment at the nearest emergency room, especially if you have:

- A fever
- Shaking chills or sweats (often goes along with fever)
- Redness, swelling, drainage, tenderness, or warmth at the site of an injury, surgical wound, or central venous catheter, or anywhere on the skin including the genital and rectal areas
- A new pain or one that's getting worse
- Sinus pain or headache
- A stiff neck
- A sore throat
- Shortness of breath or cough
- Burning or pain when you pass urine or bloody or cloudy urine

Many shelters have nursing staff who can help get you to an emergency room. Once you're at the emergency room, make sure you tell them about your cancer and if you don't have a new doctor yet, ask them for help [finding one](#)².

Q. What can I do to keep getting my cancer treatment?

A: If you are still in the area where your cancer doctor or treatment facility is located but have stopped treatment because of power outage, loss of transportation, damage to your home, or damage to the doctor's office or treatment center, contact your doctor as soon as you can and find out what you need to do to continue treatment. If you can't get in touch with your cancer doctor, try your treatment center, local emergency room, or your regular family doctor if you have one.

If you had to leave the area where you were getting treatment, you need to [find a new cancer doctor](#)³ and treatment center as soon as you can. Ask for help from the shelter staff, Red Cross, Salvation Army, or local health department. If all else fails, go to a local hospital information desk and ask for help.

Q. What about my cancer medicines?

A: If you have your medicines with you and know how to take them, keep taking them on schedule. If you need medicine, are almost out of medicine, or are unsure how to take it, you'll need to talk to a disaster-relief nurse or ask someone at the shelter for help getting in touch with a pharmacist or doctor, or you can contact your health insurance company.

Q. What if I don't know what kind of cancer treatment I was getting or what medicine I was taking?

A: If there's any way you can contact your doctor or treatment center, call and get your medical records sent to you or to a local cancer doctor as soon as possible. This helps the new doctor know how to go on with your treatment right away and get you any medicines you need.

Sometimes there are other ways to get details about your treatment. If you have health insurance and coverage for your cancer treatment, your insurance company will have records on what services you've had. You can ask that they share this information with you and/or the new doctor.

Q. What if I can't get my medical records or get in touch with my doctor?

A: Write down anything you can remember about your treatment so that you'll have this information to share with the new doctor. Include things like:

- [Type of cancer](#)⁴ and stage of cancer if you know it
- Type of treatment like [chemotherapy](#)⁵, [radiation](#)⁶, or [surgery](#)⁷
- Date of your last treatment
- Name of your doctor and treatment center
- Any medicine you're taking ([cancer medicines](#)⁸ and other medicines, including over-the-counter drugs). If you don't know names, describe it by color; size; shape; shot, pill or in a bag; how often you take it; etc.
- Other illnesses or health problems you have

Q. What if I'm taking pain medicine or medicine for depression?

A: If you stop taking some pain medicines or depression medicines all at once, it can cause problems. When you contact your doctor, a new doctor, or a pharmacy about getting your cancer medicines, be sure to ask about your pain and/or depression medicines, too. Be ready to tell them if you are still taking them, have cut down on how much you're taking, or have run out of pain and/or depression medicine. If you have run out, tell them how long you have been without the medicines. It's also a good idea to tell the nurse at the shelter, a shelter worker, or a family member or friend that you take these medicines – just in case you do have problems.

Q. What about other medicines?

A: There are some medicines that you can do without for a few days, but stopping others can cause trouble. Suddenly stopping certain sleeping medicines or anxiety medicines can cause the opposite (“rebound”) effect for a few days. Medicines to treat high blood pressure, diabetes, seizures, and low thyroid levels are designed to help you manage a long-term problem, so if the drugs are stopped, the problem can get out of control. Talk to the nurse or shelter worker about these medicines too.

Q. When will I be able to go back to my doctor and treatment center?

A: If you plan to go back to your previous doctor or treatment center, let the new doctor know that, when possible, you want to go home for treatment. As cancer treatment centers reopen, your new doctor can let you know about the openings that affect you. Make sure to ask for a copy of any current medical records to take back to your old treatment center. Also, contact your health insurance company to make sure proper steps are taken to get coverage for the treatments you need.

Living conditions and hygiene

You need to be very careful to protect yourself from illness and infections. Some kinds of cancer and cancer treatments can weaken your immune system and make it very easy for you to get [infections](#)⁹. These questions cover some of the things you can do to be safe in a shelter or short-term housing.

Q. Should I get immunizations or vaccines if they are offered?

A: If you're in an area where safe water and food may be a problem or you could be injured due to the natural disaster, you may be asked to get shots for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, the flu, pneumococcus, and tetanus. While these vaccines are safe and may

be needed, make sure the person giving the shots knows you have cancer and when you last had treatment. If you can, talk to your doctor or a local doctor before you get any shots.

It's very important that you **do not let anyone give you a "live" vaccine** unless a cancer doctor who knows your medical history says it's OK. Vaccines like the flu nasal spray, varicella zoster (for chickenpox or shingles), measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), and smallpox have live virus in them. (Please note, the flu shot is OK, only the nasal spray has live virus in it.) Sometimes the live viruses can cause serious problems for people with weak immune systems. Also, try to avoid close contact with people who have gotten live virus vaccines.

Q. What can I do to protect myself from infection and germs?

A: Do these things to protect yourself:

- Wash your hands with soap and water as often as possible. Keep washing for at least 20 seconds or as long as it takes you to sing "Happy Birthday" from beginning to end, twice.
- If you can't get soap and water, ask for alcohol hand sanitizers (that are at least 60% alcohol) and be sure to follow the directions on the product.
- Avoid touching surfaces that are frequently touched, like handrails, as much as possible. If you have to touch these surfaces, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer immediately after.
- Protect yourself from germs by wearing a mask or face covering when recommended or mandated.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, practise social distancing. Stay at least 6 feet from other people who are not part of your household.
- If there's no safe water or you don't know if the water is safe, drink only bottled water or boil water for one full minute. Allow it to cool before drinking.
- Some foods might have germs that may be harmful to you. Make sure all meats are thoroughly cooked and all fruits and vegetables are thoroughly washed in safe water. Don't eat cooked foods that have been left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Be sure to ask your doctor if there are foods you should avoid until you can get into permanent housing.
- Keep any cuts or wounds clean and covered with bandages **UNLESS** your doctor tells you otherwise. If you have a triple antibiotic ointment or cream, use it daily if it is OK with your doctor.
- Bathe or shower as often as you can and use clean towels if possible.

- Don't share toothbrushes or unwashed eating utensils or cups with others.

Q. Should I ask to be separated from others in the shelter or home? Should I ask to go to a "special needs" shelter?

A: Some shelters may have separate areas for people with special medical needs. And in some cases, special needs shelters are available. Whether a special needs shelter would be better for you depends in part on where you are in your treatment plan. If you've just gotten chemo and have very low white blood cell counts, your risk for infections may be higher in a crowded public shelter. Still, your options may be limited. Try to talk with your doctor or an on-site health care provider about your medical situation to see what else might be available and whether another location might be safer for you.

You may find more medical care is available in special needs shelters, but don't worry if you can't get into one – just make sure to take good care of yourself and follow any instructions the doctor gives you. Try to keep your body clean and stay away from people who have fevers, coughs, or any other signs of illness.

Other information to help you through this time

Q. What should I do if I have private health insurance?

A: Be sure to contact your health insurance company as soon as you can, and let them know where you are staying. Ask if there are cancer doctors and hospitals nearby in your plan, or if you can go outside your network area. Because of the disaster, your insurance company may offer special services to help evacuees.

Be sure to take proof of health insurance with you to any medical appointments. If you've lost or don't have your insurance cards, ask your insurance company to mail you information at a local address or through the new doctor's office.

Q. What should I do if I have Medicare, Medicaid, or children on the state Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)?

A: Contact the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the national organization that oversees these programs to see if they have special plans to help disaster evacuees.

The number is 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). TTY users can call 1-877-486-

2048.

Q. How can the Red Cross or FEMA help me?

A: The American Red Cross provides shelter, food, and emotional support for those affected by natural disasters. Contact the Red Cross at www.redcross.org¹⁰ or by calling 1-800-REDCROSS (1-800-733-2767).

If your losses occurred in a region that was declared a disaster area, you may qualify for federal relief funds through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Go to www.disasterassistance.gov¹¹, call 1-800-621-FEMA (1-800-621-3362), or TTY users can dial 1-800-462-7585 to find out whether you are eligible.

We have a lot more information that you might find helpful. Explore www.cancer.org or call our National Cancer Information Center toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345. We're here to help you any time, day or night.

Related Resource

[***How to Get Ready for a Natural Disaster When You Have Cancer***](#)¹²

If you are a cancer patient or caregiver and you learn a hurricane, wildfire, or other natural disaster is coming your way, take steps to prepare in advance.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/about-us/what-we-do/coronavirus-covid-19-and-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/choosing-a-doctor-and-a-hospital.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/choosing-a-doctor-and-a-hospital.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/all-cancer-types.html
5. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/chemotherapy.html
6. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation.html
7. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/surgery.html
8. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/cancer-drugs.html
9. [7](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-</div><div data-bbox=)

- [blood-counts/infections.html](#)
10. <http://www.redcross.org/>
 11. <http://www.disasterassistance.gov/>
 12. www.cancer.org/latest-news/how-to-prepare-for-a-weather-emergency-when-you-have-cancer.html
 13. www.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/covid-19/public-disaster-shelter-during-covid.html
 14. www.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/covid-19/public-disaster-shelter-during-covid.html

References

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. Going to a Public Disaster Shelter During the COVID-19 Pandemic. 2020. Accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/covid-19/public-disaster-shelter-during-covid.html> (www.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/covid-19/public-disaster-shelter-during-covid.html)¹³ on April 1, 2021.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Questions and Answers About Immunization Recommendations Following a Disaster. August 20, 2014. Accessed at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/disease/immunizationqa.asp> on February 9, 2016.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When & How to Wash Your Hands. September 4, 2015. Accessed at www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html on February 9, 2016.

US Food and Drug Administration. Food and Water Safety During Power Outages and Floods. January 19, 2016. Accessed at www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm076881.htm on February 9, 2016.

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