

Cancer-Related Fear Fact Sheet

Fear related to cancer relapse or progression can significantly impact a person's quality of life and is associated with anxiety, depression and isolation. It can hinder one's ability to plan for the future.

WHAT IS CANCER-RELATED FEAR?

In 2015 a group of expert researchers, policy-makers and patient advocates from around the world, came together to create a definition for cancer related fear. They recognised fear can affect both patients with a curable disease who fear the cancer coming back, as well as patients with advanced or incurable disease who fear their cancer progressing.

They agreed to call all types fear of cancer recurrence and defined it as fear, worry or concern relating to the possibility that the cancer will come back or progressⁱ

This definition is widely recognised and is accepted for use in current research studies.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Fear of cancer recurrence (FCR) can present itself in varying levels of severity:ⁱⁱ

- Mild FCR – Occasional thoughts about cancer with peaks of anxiety that are resolved after a few days. These occasions are triggered by external factors like follow-up medical appointments.
- Moderate to severe FCR – More frequent thoughts about cancer without external triggers (one or more time per week), a perceived inability to control these thoughts, and a strong feeling of related distress.

Severe FCR is considered clinically significant and is unlikely to resolve itself without clinical intervention. Clinically significant or severe FCR is associated with the followingⁱⁱⁱ:

1. Death-related thoughts
2. Feeling alone
3. Believing that cancer will return
4. Experiencing uncertainty
5. Having cancer-related thoughts and imagery that are difficult to control
6. Daily and recurrent thoughts
7. Thoughts that last 30 minutes or longer
8. Experiencing distress
9. Experience of increased distress over time
10. Impact on individual's daily life

