

Just Diagnosed with Cancer: Rural and Regional Areas

A guide for people living outside major cities who are affected by cancer

Being told you have cancer can be a shock. Living in a rural or regional area may bring extra challenges. This fact sheet explains what can happen after a cancer diagnosis. It covers tests and scans, treatment, emotional support, and getting help closer to home.

Many people feel shocked and upset when told they have cancer. It's often a confusing and overwhelming time. You may have many questions and wonder what it means for you.

Almost a third of people in Australia live outside major cities. For people living in rural and regional areas, a cancer diagnosis may bring extra worries, such as:

- Will I have to travel to a city for treatment?
- Where will I stay if I need to travel for treatment?
- Who will look after my family, farm, pets or business while I am away?
- Will I get the same standard of care as people in the city?
- Will there be anyone nearby to support me?

It's common to have concerns and feel upset after a cancer diagnosis. You can find help and support by calling Cancer Connect on 13 11 20. Our qualified professionals can listen to your concerns and connect you with support services.

What can happen next

After a diagnosis, you may wonder what will happen next. While everyone's experience differs, many people follow similar steps. These usually are:

- more tests and scans to learn about the cancer
- seeing a cancer specialist (e.g. an oncologist)

Information from Cancer Council

Cancer Council provides free information on more than 40 different types of cancer, as well as treatments and emotional and practical issues. We also have a booklet called *Just Diagnosed*, which provides more detailed information for people affected by a recent cancer diagnosis.

You can access our information in various formats:

- on the Cancer Connect website
- printed and downloadable booklets and fact sheets
- podcasts and videos.

Visit cancerconnect.org.au or call 13 11 20 to get free copies of our booklets or for help finding the best information for you.



- preparing for treatment
- having treatment
- managing symptoms and side effects
- life after treatment.

Some steps may take longer when you live in rural and regional areas. You may need to travel for some tests, specialist appointments and treatment.

You may also need to stay away from your home for short periods while having tests and treatment. Your healthcare team can help you plan for this, and financial help may be available (see page 6). While you may be able to have some appointments by telehealth (phone or video calls, see page 5), many people in rural and regional areas will have to travel to see specialists and have treatment.

Why more tests and scans?

You may have already had tests or scans. After a cancer diagnosis, doctors often need to do other tests to get detailed information about the cancer. This helps them plan the best treatment for you.

Tests may show:

- where the cancer started
- its size and if it has spread (stage)
- how fast it may grow (grade)
- your general health.

If you live in a rural or regional area, you may need to travel for some scans, like an MRI or PET scan. Your general practitioner (GP) or cancer care team can help arrange these. See pages 6–7 for more information about travelling for treatment.

You probably won't need every test (see *Common tests and scans*, right), but you will likely need some. If you're unsure about a test or scan, ask your doctor to explain it.

You can also ask if some tests can be bulk-billed or done in the public system to help with costs. If you are travelling for multiple tests, ask if they can be done at the same time to reduce travel.

Waiting for test and scan results

Waiting for results can be one of the more difficult parts of a cancer experience. Some people call this "scanxiety".

For people living in rural and regional areas, this waiting time can feel even more stressful. You might face longer wait times, need to travel for tests, or need to wait for results while away from home. Ask your cancer care team how long results usually take, and who will contact you. Knowing what to expect can help reduce anxiety.

If you need support, contact your GP or cancer care team, or call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20.

Your healthcare team

Many different health professionals may be involved in your care. In rural and regional areas, your care is often shared between local and specialist services. This is called shared care (see page 5).

Common tests and scans

Blood and urine tests – Blood tests check your general health and sometimes show more about the cancer. For some types of cancer, your urine (wee or pee) may be tested to check if it contains blood or cancer cells.

Imaging scans – These use special equipment to take pictures of the inside of your body. Common scans include x-rays, ultrasound, CT, MRI and PET scans. They help doctors see the size of the cancer and whether it has spread. Scans are done in a hospital or radiology clinic. For more information, see our *Just Diagnosed* booklet or call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20.

Biopsies – A biopsy is when a doctor removes a small sample of cells or tissue from an area of the body. This may be done with a needle, through a small cut in the skin, or during surgery. The sample is examined under a microscope to look for signs of cancer and what type of cell is affected.

Scoping tests – For some cancers, doctors use a thin, flexible tube with a camera on the end (called a scope) to look inside your body and examine your organs. Different types of scoping tests are used to check different parts of the body (e.g. a colonoscopy checks the large bowel, and a bronchoscopy checks the lungs).

Cancer health professionals you may see include:

- **medical oncologist** – treats cancer with drug therapies such as chemotherapy
- **radiation oncologist** – treats cancer by prescribing and overseeing radiation therapy
- **cancer care coordinator** – coordinates your care and works with your cancer care team
- **cancer nurse** – provides information, support and practical help throughout your cancer care.

The role of a GP

Your GP is often a central member of your healthcare team if you live in a rural or regional area. They can be your main point of contact for day-to-day health needs, and help coordinate your care between local services and specialists.

Your GP can explain your diagnosis and help you understand your options. They can refer you to specialists and allied health professionals (e.g. physiotherapist, exercise physiologist, psychologist, dietitian).

Your GP can also:

- help arrange a second opinion if you want one
- manage your general health during treatment
- be your contact person between specialist appointments and treatment sessions.

If you don't have a regular GP, visit Healthdirect (healthdirect.gov.au) and go to the service finder, or call 1800 022 222.

Some rural towns have limited GP availability. If your GP leaves or you can't get an appointment, contact your local hospital or community health centre. They can help you find another doctor or connect you with telehealth services.

What will happen to me?

This may be one of the first questions people ask after being diagnosed. Your doctor may talk to you about what to expect. This is called the prognosis. No-one can predict exactly how the cancer will affect you or respond to treatment, but your doctor can explain what usually happens for people with the type of cancer you have.

The doctor works out your prognosis by looking at your test results, the type of cancer, the stage and grade and how likely treatment is to work. They will also consider your age, fitness and medical history. A prognosis is never certain, and it can change over time. Some people don't want to know their prognosis. You decide how much you want to know.

If the cancer is advanced

Finding out the cancer is advanced (stage 4 or metastatic) when it's first diagnosed can be devastating. Treatment for advanced cancer is improving all the time, and sometimes it can be controlled for years.

Treatment may focus on supporting people to do the things that are important to them, controlling symptoms, and maintaining quality of life. Some people are referred to a palliative care team. Palliative care can help at any stage of advanced cancer.

- See our booklets *Living with Advanced Cancer* and *Understanding Palliative Care*. Listen to our podcast series *The Thing About Advanced Cancer*.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and cancer care

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the cancer experience can be more challenging – especially if treatment requires travel away from Country, family and community. You may worry about whether health services will understand and respect your culture, involve your family and support networks in decision-making, and meet your cultural needs throughout your care.

You do not have to face cancer alone. Many hospitals have Aboriginal health workers, Aboriginal liaison officers, or Indigenous care coordinators who can support you.

They can help you communicate with your healthcare team, access services, and ensure your cultural needs and preferences are recognised and respected. Ask your treatment team whether this support is available.

You may find it helpful to:

- bring family members, Elders, or trusted support people to your appointments
- contact your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) for advice and support
- call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for information, practical support and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affected by cancer.

Coping with emotions

When you're told you have cancer, it's common to have strong feelings. For people living in rural and regional areas, the emotional impact can feel bigger. You might worry about being far from your specialist and treatment team, or about being a burden on family or community members.

If you are finding it difficult to cope, talk to your GP or cancer care team. They may refer you to a psychologist or counsellor. Ask your GP about accessing a mental health treatment plan. This can reduce the cost of appointments.

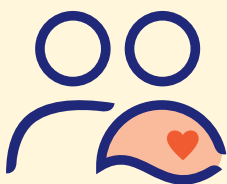
You can also call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to talk to a qualified professional. They may be able to connect you to a trained volunteer who has been through a similar cancer experience.

- See our *Emotions and Cancer* booklet.

Ways to manage your emotions after a cancer diagnosis

You might find some of these strategies helpful in managing how you feel after a cancer diagnosis and during treatment. If you're experiencing high levels of distress, talk to your cancer care team, GP or call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20. For 24-hour support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Stay connected in your community



Living in a rural or regional area can shape how a cancer diagnosis feels – and how you talk about it. In a small town, news travels fast. Some people find that their community rallies around them with meals, lifts and offers of help. Others may want to keep their diagnosis private. Many people are used to getting on with things and not asking for help. But cancer is not something you need to push through alone. You might start by telling one or two people you trust.

Look after yourself



If your health allows, being active, eating healthy food and drinking plenty of water can help you cope with the emotional stress of cancer and its treatment. It can also help to focus on maintaining or improving your sleep. If you are travelling for treatment or staying away from home, try to keep small routines that support your wellbeing.

Clear your mind



Yoga, meditation and breathing exercises can help you feel more in control, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve mood. Some services are available online if you don't have access locally. Listen to Cancer Council's podcast *Finding Calm During Cancer*.

Talk to people who understand



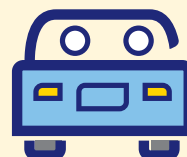
If you live outside a major city, you may not have easy access to support groups or people who have been through a similar experience. Connecting with others who understand what you're going through can help. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 to see if there are online or telephone support groups or someone you can talk to who has had a similar cancer experience and lives in a rural or regional area.

Focus on one day at a time



Thinking of all the "what-ifs" can feel overwhelming. It can help to focus just on the next step. Taking things one day at a time can make challenges feel more manageable – especially if you are balancing appointments, travel or time away from home.

It's okay to ask for help



Accepting help is not a sign of weakness. Letting people know what you need – whether that's a meal, a lift, or someone to check in on the farm or family – gives your community a way to support you. There are also apps (e.g. Gather My Crew) that make it easy for family and friends to organise practical support.

Find out what to expect



Learning about cancer and its treatment can help you make decisions and feel more in control. Learn at your own pace, so you don't feel overwhelmed. It might be useful to bring a family member or friend to appointments for support and to take notes. You can also ask to record the appointment with the doctor's consent. Many doctors now also use AI tools to record and transcribe visits – you can ask for their notes.

“You can feel isolated living in a remote area. Online mindfulness and tai chi classes have been a great way to reach out and not feel stuck at home.” MARY

Making treatment decisions

Your doctor will recommend treatments based on the type of cancer, where it began, if it has spread, your age and general health, and your preferences.

If you are feeling like everything is happening too fast or you are overwhelmed with information, ask your doctor about how long you can take to make decisions. You can accept or refuse any treatment offered, and change your mind at any time.

You can also ask to speak to another specialist to get a second opinion. Doctors are used to this. You can get a second opinion and stay with your current specialist, or you may choose to change doctors. Ask your GP, oncologist or cancer care coordinator to help you find a doctor for a second opinion.

Where will I have treatment?

Living in a rural and regional area may mean you need to make choices about where to have treatment. Many people will need to travel for appointments and treatment. Even travelling to the nearest town or city may mean hours on the road.

Australia has some excellent regional cancer centres and hospitals that treat many different types of cancers. If you have a more common cancer type and are having treatment in the public system, you may be able to have treatment at the nearest regional cancer centre. For some rare cancers, you may be referred to a specialist centre with particular expertise and experience. This may mean a longer wait time and more travel if it's not nearby.

If you need to travel for treatment, you may be able to get help with transport and accommodation costs (see pages 6–7).

What is shared care?

Shared care is when different health professionals work together to support your cancer care.

For example, your specialist may oversee your treatment while your GP helps manage symptoms, prescriptions, referrals and follow-up care closer to home. Ask your doctor if shared care is an option for you and if it might help you stay closer to home.

Understanding the treatment options

Some people have only one main treatment. Others have a mix of treatments. Some treatments can be given before the main treatment (this is called neoadjuvant) or after (called adjuvant). Common treatment types include:

Surgery – aims to remove the cancer from the body or removes and repairs a part of the body affected by cancer. See our *Understanding Surgery* booklet.

Radiation therapy – uses a controlled dose of radiation to kill cancer cells or stop them from growing. See our *Understanding Radiation Therapy* booklet.

Drug therapies – medicines that travel through the bloodstream to treat cancer (e.g. chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy). See our *Understanding Chemotherapy* booklet and our fact sheets on *targeted therapy and immunotherapy*.

How to use telehealth

Telehealth is having appointments by phone or video call. This is now more widely used for appointments, particularly for people in rural and regional areas. Telehealth can reduce how often you need to travel.

If you can use telehealth, here are some good tips to get the most out of it:

- ensure your phone or internet connection is reliable
- have a list of questions ready before the call
- ask someone you trust to join you if it helps
- ask for a written summary of what was discussed.

If you can't do telehealth appointments at home, your local community health centre, your GP or your local hospital may be able to help you access telehealth from their location. Your GP may also be able to attend telehealth appointments with specialists if you wish.

Your cancer care team should be able to advise which appointments you may be able to do by telehealth.

What is informed consent?

Before any treatment starts, your doctor must explain what it involves, other options, possible side effects and risks, and the likely costs.

When you understand this information and agree to treatment, this is called informed consent. You'll usually be asked to sign a document to show that you understand the information you are given and agree to treatment. If you're unsure or need more information, talk to your doctor or someone in your cancer care team.

Public or private care?

Cancer treatment in Australia is available through the public health system, the private health system, or a mix of both. If you live in a rural or regional area, your choices may be affected by travel, waiting times, and where specialists and cancer treatment centres are located.

You might have treatment at your local hospital, a regional cancer centre, or a larger city hospital. Your GP and cancer care team can help explain your options and what they mean for you.

For more information about public and private care – including costs, what Medicare covers, and using private health insurance – see our *Just Diagnosed* booklet. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for a copy of the booklet or for more information.

Can I join clinical trials and teletrials?

A clinical trial tests whether a new cancer treatment works and is safe. Taking part may give you access to new treatments and help improve future cancer care.

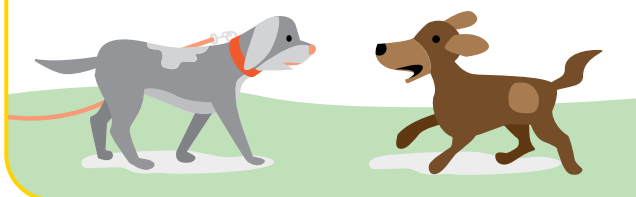
If you live in a rural or regional area, it might be harder to access clinical trials. You may need to travel to a larger city. Ask your doctor if there are any clinical trials that might be right for you.

You can also ask about teletrials. These connect your local health service with a larger cancer centre, which means you may be able to take part in a trial closer to home. Some parts of your care may still happen in a larger centre.

► See our *Understanding Clinical Trials and Research* booklet.

Pet care if you need to travel

If you have pets and need to travel for treatment, it may help to plan ahead for your pets. Family, friends, your vet or local boarding services may be able to help. Online services such as Mad Paws (madpaws.com.au), Pawshake (pawshake.com.au) and PetCloud (petcloud.com.au) can also connect you with local people who offer home visits, house sitting or boarding for pets.



Financial and practical help

Cancer can make earning money harder and at the same time increase expenses. If you live in a rural or regional area, costs may be higher because of travel, accommodation and time away from work.

Many people worry about money when diagnosed with cancer. There are several professionals and organisations that can help with advice and financial assistance. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for more information about what support is available.

► See our *Cancer and Your Finances* booklet.

Travel and accommodation support

Many people living in rural and regional areas need to travel to cities or larger regional centres for treatment – and they may also need to be away from home for periods of time.

Some hospitals have staff who provide support for patients from rural and regional areas. They may be called a rural liaison nurse, patient liaison officer, cancer care coordinator or patient travel team. They can help you organise transport and accommodation, as well as find local support.

Every state and territory in Australia has a government scheme to help people who need to travel to cancer treatment and stay away from home. These schemes can help eligible people cover some of the costs of travel and accommodation near your treatment centre (see next page).

Travel and accommodation schemes		
State/Territory	Scheme	Contact
NSW	Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS)	1800 478 227 iptaas.health.nsw.gov.au
NT	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	nt.gov.au (search patient assisted travel)
Queensland	Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme (PTSS)	13 43 25 84 qld.gov.au/health/services/travel/subsidies
SA	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	1300 341 684 sahealth.sa.gov.au (search PATS)
Tasmania	Patient Travel Assistance Scheme	health.tas.gov.au (search PTAS)
Victoria	Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS)	1300 737 073 health.vic.gov.au (search vptas)
WA	Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)	wacountry.health.wa.gov.au (search PATS)



Cancer Council can help you find transport and accommodation support. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for help finding the scheme in your area.

Other financial support

Whether you can work during and after treatment depends on many factors, such as how you're feeling and the type of work you do. Ask your doctor about how cancer and treatment may affect your work.

If you work casually, seasonally or for yourself, you may not have paid leave or income protection. This can make the financial impact of cancer feel more immediate. If you have to stop working because of cancer, you may be able to get financial support in different ways.

Support for rural business owners and farmers

A farm or business is hard to put on hold. Livestock still need feeding. Seasons don't wait. Customers still call. If cancer means time away, planning early can help. Think about who could step in – a family member, neighbour or employee.

Support and services that may be able to help include:

- **Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS)** – Free, independent and confidential financial counselling for eligible farmers, fishers and small rural businesses. Visit rfcsnetwork.com.au or call 1300 771 741.
- **Farm Household Allowance** – An Australian Government income support payment for farming families experiencing financial hardship. For current details, call the Farmer Assistance Hotline on 132 316 or visit servicesaustralia.gov.au.
- **Farmer Assistance Hotline** – Specially trained Services Australia staff who can talk through income support options for farmers. Call 132 316 (Monday to Friday, 8am–5pm).
- **Cancer Council** – Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for help navigating financial support, referrals to social workers, and other assistance that may be available.

Government benefits – A range of payments are provided by Centrelink for people with cancer and carers. To check if you're eligible for payments, ask your social worker or visit servicesaustralia.gov.au.

Superannuation (super) – You may be able to access super early in certain circumstances. Talk to your super provider or a financial professional for advice.

Insurances – Personal insurance policies (e.g. income protection or total and permanent disability insurance) may cover your situation. Or you may have cover through your super. Talk to your insurer or superannuation provider.

Caring for someone with cancer

Carers often take on more than people realise. In rural and regional areas, this can include driving long distances to treatment, managing the property or business and being the main source of emotional support.

In smaller communities, people often want to help but don't know how. Let them know what you need, such as a meal, a lift or help at home.

You may be able to access respite care. This can give carers a short break – for a few hours, overnight or several days. Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 for more information. Carer Gateway can help you find what is available in your area (call 1800 422 737 or visit carergateway.gov.au).

► See our *Caring for Someone with Cancer* booklet.

Questions to ask your health professionals

This list may be helpful when thinking about questions to ask.

- What stage is the cancer? Has it spread?
- What tests and scans do I need?
- Will I need to travel for treatment or specialist appointments, and stay overnight?
- Is there any financial assistance I can get for accommodation and travel? Can a family member travel with me?
- Can I use telehealth for any of my appointments?
- What side effects might I have from the cancer or the treatment?
- What happens if I cannot drive myself to appointments and treatment?
- What are the likely out-of-pocket costs?
- What support services are available in my area?
- What if there is no GP in my area?

Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 or visit the website for more information about cancer and health care. Qualified professionals can listen to your concerns, put you in touch with local services and send you free copies of our booklets. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Connect	cancerconnect.org.au
ACT	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT	cancer.org.au/nt
QLD	cancerqld.org.au
SA	cancersa.org.au
TAS	cancer.org.au/tas
VIC	cancervic.org.au
WA	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia	cancer.org.au

Other useful contacts

eviQ (cancer treatment information)	eviq.org.au
Farmer Assistance Hotline	132 316
National Rural Health Alliance	ruralhealth.org.au
Rural Financial Counselling Service Network	1300 771 741 rfcsnetwork.com.au

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

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Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present.

