Stress Management for Head and Neck Cancer Patients

Stress is used to describe what people feel when they are under physical, emotional or social pressure. Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel upset, angry, nervous or anxious.

A diagnosis of head and neck cancer can cause a great deal of stress. You may not be able to remove the reason for your stress, but there are ways to help you cope with the changes caused by your cancer and treatment.

Signs of Stress

Symptoms of stress may include the following:

- **Physical Symptoms**
  - Muscle tension
  - High blood pressure, fast heartbeat or heart flutters
  - Hard to take a deep breath or fast breathing
  - Headache
  - Feeling light headed, weak or tired
  - Upset stomach

- **Emotional Concerns**
  - Feeling nervous, jumpy, very emotional
  - Quick to anger, impatient, easily upset
  - Feeling down, sad, teary
  - Feeling hopeless, frightened, overwhelmed
  - Feeling a lack of control

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

• **Cognitive (Thinking) Changes**
  - More negative thoughts
  - Trouble focusing or memory problems
  - Distorted thoughts or worries

**What can I do to help manage my stress?**

Here are some healthy ways to cope with stress. Members of your health care team can give you more information about each of these techniques. You can also meet with a mental health clinical nurse specialist, psychologist or social worker to learn how to use these techniques to help manage your stress.

• **Moderate Exercise**
  Moderate exercise can help lower stress and fight fatigue. Exercise releases a natural body substance called endorphin, which creates a feeling of well-being.

• **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**
  Progressive muscle relaxation is a way to decrease tension in your muscles. This is done by alternating the tensing of different muscle groups throughout your body.

• **Breathing Exercises**
  It is common for your breathing to change when you are stressed. Breathing exercises are used to help reduce the stress that can cause muscle tension. Tense muscles may add to pain. These exercises can help relax tense muscles and may help with pain.

• **Social Support**
  Connecting with others who understand what you are facing can help you feel less alone. The James has a monthly support group for people with head and neck cancer and their caregivers. Members share ways to manage changes in appearance, communication and eating, as well as other challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis. The James also has a peer support program that provides the opportunity for you to talk with a volunteer who has been treated for head and neck cancer. Ask a member of your health care team for more information about these programs and other resources (books, organizations) about cancer survivorship.
• **Writing in a Journal**
  Writing about how you feel in a journal can lower your stress and help you understand your feelings. It can also serve as a personal record of your challenges and successes.

• **Distraction**
  Distraction techniques can be used to manage stress during brief, difficult times. For example, during radiation treatment, some patients pass the time by counting or listening to music during their treatment.

**How Do You Feel?**

When you have a major life change, it may help to take time to check in with yourself to see how you feel. You may find it helpful to use the following online self-assessment tool:

- [https://www.nccn.org/patients/resources/life_with_cancer/pdf/nccn_distress_thermometer.pdf](https://www.nccn.org/patients/resources/life_with_cancer/pdf/nccn_distress_thermometer.pdf)

- If you are worried about your mental or emotional health, or any of the items you marked as a problem on your self-assessment, tell a member of your health care team. You may find it helpful to bring your completed self-assessment to your next medical appointment.