

Coping with cancer after a natural disaster:

A fact sheet for persons affected by cancer and their families and friends



When natural disasters occur, access to treatment services and other avenues of support may be restricted and treatment routines may need to change.

In the event of natural disasters, our Cancer Council Helpline remains available to provide patients and the community with up-to-date advice and information about health services and support.

Call us on 13 11 20, 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday or email us at helpline@cancerqld.org.au. We are here to provide emotional support and practical advice.

This fact sheet may help you if you or someone you know has cancer and is affected by a natural disaster. It will help you to make informed decisions about your options for accessing appropriate care and support during the disaster and the recovery phase.

What should I do if my treatment plans have changed?

If you or someone you care about have cancer and have had to evacuate your home, you may not be able to access your doctor or nurse in the usual way. You may also have your treatment times altered and your treatment hospital may be in 'emergency' mode.

If your treatment plan has been affected, you may have questions about what this will mean for you. Changes to treatment times will be managed by your treatment team. If you require cancer-related information and emotional support, please call our Helpline on 13 11 20 or send us an email.

What should I do if I have an emergency?

If you have an emergency or notice any new symptoms, please go to your nearest emergency treatment centre

or the emergency department at the nearest hospital.

Seek medical advice if you experience the following symptoms:

- * Signs of fever
- * Shaking chills or sweats
- * Redness, swelling, drainage, tenderness or warmth at the site of a cut, surgical wound or vascular access device
- * A new pain or one that is getting worse
- * Sinus pain or headache
- * Stiff neck
- * Sore throat
- * Shortness of breath or cough
- * Burning or pain when you urinate, bloody or cloudy urine.

You should also notify your treatment team or hospital or provide their details to staff at the emergency department.

What if I can't get to my treatment hospital?

If you need to attend another hospital because you are staying somewhere different to your usual treatment centre, you must tell the staff in emergency about your cancer, who your treatment team or hospital are, and when you last had contact with them. This will help them to give you the best care and also assist them to make contact with your treatment team on your behalf.

If you cannot access an emergency department you should try to contact your treatment team or hospital directly and they will make suitable arrangements for transporting you to a treating area. Some regional areas provide telephone support for patients who cannot reach their usual treatment centre.

For more information on this call **13HEALTH (13 43 25 84)**.

What should I do if my treatment plans have changed?

If you have your medications with you and know how to take them, keep taking them. If you need medication, are nearly out of medication, or are unsure how to take it, you will need to talk to a health care professional who is familiar with your treatment. Again always try to contact your cancer treatment team or hospital first before asking someone new.

Contact details should have been provided with the information kit you received on your first visit to your treatment hospital, if you do not have this with you, you can call our Helpline and we can give you the contact details of the hospital. Email us at helpline@cancerqld.org.au or call us on 13 11 20.

Living conditions and hygiene

If you are taking medication for cancer, you need to be careful to protect yourself from disease and infections. Some kinds of cancer and some treatments for cancer can weaken your immune system and make it very easy for you to acquire an infection.

If you are currently undergoing cancer treatment or weakened by your previous treatment, avoid exposure to contaminated sites and the cleanup of buildings and areas affected by the natural disaster. We recommend patients and recent patients avoid returning to buildings affected by floods or cyclones and absolutely avoid coming into contact with mud and mould after a flood event.

You may wish to return to your home as soon as possible, but it is important to avoid exposure to germs in order to maintain your wellness and optimise your recovery from treatment.

Queensland Health has developed several excellent fact sheets related to keeping you safe during a natural disaster:

Stay safe and healthy during flood recovery:

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster/documents/stay-safe.pdf>

Food safety in an emergency:

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster/documents/food-safety.pdf>

Controlling mosquito breeding after floods:

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster/documents/mosquitoes.pdf>

Use and disposal of drugs and poisons after a disaster:

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster/documents/drugs-and-poisons.pdf>

Important rules to follow

Wash your hands as often as possible or use an antibacterial hand wash. This is the single most important action you can do to keep yourself safe from germs.

If you are unsure about the safety of the drinking water, drink only bottled water if you have access to it or boil water for at least one full minute and allow to cool before drinking.

Be very careful with food and food preparation.

Should I get immunisations or vaccines that are offered after a natural disaster?

Following floods or natural disasters, there is a risk of tetanus when wounds may be infected by bacteria, which are present in the soil.

It is important before you have any injection that you let the health care worker know you have cancer or you are caring for someone who has cancer.

Because your immune system may be compromised because of your cancer or your cancer treatment it is very important that advice regarding immunisation is sought from a medical practitioner. You may be offered alternative options. Contact your cancer treatment team or hospital for specific concerns about immunisation.

Remember if you have a wound, clean and disinfect it and keep it covered. You need to avoid all flood water and mud if you have exposed wounds. Wounds heal most quickly if the limbs are rested and elevated.

Remember – if you need any support or more information regarding the management of your cancer our Helpline is available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday on 13 11 20.