

Riding the emotional roller coaster 3: Advanced cancer

When remission or cure is no longer possible

There are times when cancers do not respond to treatment and either come back (recur), or spread to other parts of the body (metastasis). For many women with gynaecological cancer, the disease is already at an advanced stage when it is diagnosed. Dealing with advanced or recurrent cancer can be very distressing, but there is hope. There is hope that you can live as long as possible. There is hope that you will continue to do the things that give your life meaning. There is hope that you will achieve quality of life in the face of an unknown quantity of life.

You may be surprised to know that some women live for many years with advanced cancer. Unfortunately, for others, the time from diagnosis to death from their disease is short. Few can predict with any certainty how long they will live, and this uncertainty can be very hard to accept. In time, many women find that living in the moment - concentrating on the 'here and now' - is the best way to live well.

"I know I am going to die from my cancer, but I intend to LIVE until I die".

Not surprisingly, most women diagnosed with advanced cancer feel afraid about the future. They fear being in pain. They fear the cancer will progress to a stage when they will be unable to do everyday things. They fear they will become a burden on others. They fear for the loved ones they will leave behind. If possible, discuss these fears with your loved ones. Sometimes this can be difficult. It is not uncommon for family and friends to try to avoid talking about such painful issues. Let them know that it is important for you to voice your fears. This does not mean that you have 'given up'; it means that you are facing the challenge. It is also important that you share your concerns with your health care team and seek their support. They can also help you manage your physical symptoms to enable you to have the best possible quality of life.

At a time when so much may feel out of your control, dealing with practical issues can help you face the prospect of death. Some things that can help you ensure you will be in control in the final phases of your illness include:

- Preparing a Living Will describing when life-saving treatment should or should not be given
- Preparing a Will outlining who should receive your possessions and property
- Planning funeral and burial arrangements that let family and friends know how you would like to be remembered
- If you are a single mother) making custody arrangements for your children
- Letting friends and family know exactly what they can do to help.