

Do You Have Scanxiety?

Anxiety about scans, bloodwork and similar tests is a common experience for many people living with and beyond cancer, but they are finding creative ways to ease its grip.

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“Scanxiety” may not be a familiar term, but what it sums up—the fear and anxiety that can arise before, during or after imaging scans and other kinds of testing, such as blood work—is far from unfamiliar to many people with cancer and chronic illnesses. Even cancer-free survivors often continue to undergo follow-up testing to check for recurrence, which can cause a lot of angst, what-if worries and sleepless nights.

With scans and lab testing “we can potentially gain a great deal of information about what’s happening inside our bodies,” says psychologist JB Ward, PhD, a melanoma survivor and assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. “We know that the results are then often used to make decisions or predictions about our future and health and well-being. So there’s a lot of emphasis on this one moment in time, this one outcome.” It’s understandable that the anxiety this situation triggers can be “really significant for people,” she says.

Ahead is a deeper look at scanxiety, what researchers are learning about it and how people with cancer as well as survivors and their supporters have learned to live with it and soften its impact on their lives—and how you can too.

Scanxiety’s Scope

Although scanxiety research is still in its infancy, scientists are starting to have a sense of who may be affected by the condition and what their pain points are. A pilot study published in the journal *Lung Cancer* in 2016, for example, found that 83% of those who had advanced lung cancer experienced some level of scanxiety regarding computerized tomography (CT), positron emission tomography (PET) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans. And their distress appeared to last beyond the time period around the scan, suggesting it may have an ongoing effect on their lives.

“Some people are more anxious about the actual procedure itself—being inside the scanner, for example, or having an uncomfortable procedure, like receiving contrast dye for a particular scan,” says Heather Derry-Vick, PhD, a clinical psychologist in the department of psychiatry and behavioral health at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine in Nutley, New Jersey, who studies scanxiety. “Others are more nervous about the results and what those might show for their illness and their treatment and prognosis—and the uncertainty that comes along with that.” And some people have anxiety about both, she adds.

Derry-Vick’s views are informed, in part, by a review she led of 36 studies on scanxiety published in the journal *Cancers* in 2023. It found that the most common purposes of scans were routine posttreatment monitoring to detect disease recurrence and routine monitoring to detect disease progression or treatment response.

Research suggests that the greatest amounts of stress were associated with waiting a long time for test results, having to undergo additional testing due to murky results and being a generally anxious person. Scanxiety may also prevent important information from sinking in. One study found that advanced cancer patients who were particularly anxious before meeting with an oncologist about their scan outcomes were less likely afterward to accurately report the results than those who were less anxious. “We found it concerning because these scans are so important for people to understand their illness,” Derry-Vick says. “Finding ways to minimize these effects is really important so that patients can continue to be well informed about their cancer and their treatments.”

Scanxiety Symptoms

Feeling worried. Disrupted sleeping. A sense of dread. Nausea or trouble eating. Irritability and crankiness. A racing heart. Tightness in the chest. Having trouble concentrating. Feeling restless, agitated or tense.

These are some of the symptoms that people with scanxiety have reported experiencing, according to a 2021 study in the journal *Supportive Care in Cancer*. “When I have the anticipation of that scan or that result, I have trouble sleeping, my heart rate increases, I have a really hard time concentrating and I get distracted,” says Ward, the psychologist and melanoma survivor. “But it varies for everyone. A lot of people can probably relate to my experience, and others have different things that happen for them.”

“Every three or four months when I have my scans, the week before, I start to not feel well,” says Adrienne Goldberg, 37, who had a bilateral mastectomy and radiation for breast cancer in 2024, only to have the cancer metastasize to her spine. “I usually have a stomachache or a headache. I

like to think I'm probably sick from something else, but I know every time it's because of the scans. Even before cancer, when I was worried about something or nervous, it went into my body."

In 2018, Ella Maslin Fink was diagnosed with aggressive papillary thyroid cancer and had her thyroid removed, followed by radiation. Her scanxiety was particularly acute in the critical months after surgery and radiation treatment. "When you don't know if the surgeon got all the cancer out or whether the treatment actually worked, it's absolutely terrifying to think about what might happen to you, whether there's more treatment or they have nothing left to offer you," she says.

Rich Sauser, a technology risk manager for a financial organization who lives in Mount Holly, North Carolina, has been on active surveillance for prostate cancer for about a year. The score on his PSA test, which measures prostate specific antigen, recently rose, which set off his anxiety. "You're always wondering because it is living in you, and you're trying to change supplements and your diet and exercise," he says. "Will any of these things make a difference? And when you try, you're like, My gosh, I failed, because it went up again."

Scanxiety isn't limited to people who have cancer and survivors; it can also affect their caregivers and family. Henry, the 21-year-old son of Rachel Mindrup, an artist and associate professor of drawing and painting at Creighton University in Omaha, was diagnosed with neurofibromatosis (which causes tumors to grow along nerves) when he was 4 months old and has had dozens of scans, two brain surgeries and an eye surgery since then. Although neurofibromatosis is not cancer, it's very unpredictable, Mindrup says. "The tumors can, without warning, become cancerous. I always feel like the scanxiety ramps up after the scan, when you're waiting for the results," she says. "I feel a sense of dread, kind of sick. And I get these weird little episodes, where I'm trying to sleep at night and it's like, Oh, my God, am I having a heart attack? I've noticed that they correspond with Henry's scans.

"And then I get anxiety again when we're driving to St. Louis [for another scan]. You kind of get lulled into thinking everything's fine for two or three months, and then it's like, 'Oh, here we go again. What are they gonna find this time?' I always say you live life between the scans."

SIDE STORY:

Coping Strategies

Learning which strategies may help alleviate your scanxiety involves taking time to reflect on your personal experience, says Heather Derry-Vick, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine in New Jersey. To get a sense of your patterns, ask yourself when your anxiety

is more likely to flare up. The following tips may help you ratchet down scanxiety's hold; some of them are drawn from Derry-Vick's current research.

Address the scan procedure if it makes you anxious.

If you feel (or anticipate feeling) claustrophobic or physically uncomfortable during a scan, try to alert your medical team in advance for support. They might be able to prescribe a medication to manage the short-term anxiety or adapt the procedure somehow, like by using a wider machine, Derry-Vick says.

Determine how you want to get test results.

Receiving results through a patient portal can be a double-edged sword, according to Derry-Vick. On the pro side, it can shorten the waiting period between a scan and results, which for many is the most stressful time. "People feel empowered or engaged by accessing their results directly," she says. It can also give you the space to process the information and develop a list of questions before meeting with your doctor.

On the con side: Confusing or concerning results can be hard to interpret without the help of a medical provider. "For me, reading the result on the portal can cause a lot more anxiety," says JB Ward, a melanoma survivor who waits to speak with her doctor about results. To resist the temptation to check your portal, she suggests turning off phone alerts or having a trusted person help keep you from logging in.

Write things down.

If you're concerned about test results and questions swirl around in your mind, write them down. It can help manage your stress in the moment as well as help make sure your questions are answered when you see your health care provider, Derry-Vick says.

Engage in activities that are pleasurable or meaningful to you.

Plan pleasurable activities or hobbies around the time of your scan or afterward. It can help pass the time, occupy your mind in a positive way and keep you engaged in what you love to do. "I draw or paint," says artist Rachel Mindrup, who is working on a bright, colorful series of paintings she's calling *The Eloquent Brain*. "It keeps me from sitting around, being idle and worrying."

As a Taylor Swift fan, breast cancer survivor Adrienne Goldberg has used Swift's lyrics to document her journey. The day she had a spine biopsy to find out whether her cancer had spread, her board at the hospital read, "Are we out of the woods yet?"—words from a Swift song from her album 1989. "It helped me deal with rough times by thinking of her lyrics and how I can use them

to calm me down and bring me joy.”

Try relaxation exercises.

Exercises like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery and meditation can help on a day-to-day basis, Derry-Vick says. She notes that skills like these are usually most helpful when you practice them in advance. Relieving stress is like building a muscle—it takes trying something multiple times to benefit from it. “These are portable strategies that can be used in a variety of situations,” Derry-Vick says. “When we take the time to calm our bodies, that often can help with our emotions and thoughts as well.”

When Evie T., 59, a two-time breast cancer survivor in Asbury Park, New Jersey, found herself in her first MRI scan 15 years ago—feeling hot while “face down, butt in the air in this weird position,” she recalls—she visualized herself at the beach. “I had my eyes closed, and I just kept saying, ‘Be at the beach,’ ‘Be at the beach,’ and I got through it. That was my first experience with scanxiety.” Later, while undergoing radiation, when she’d wake up in the middle of the night and her brain would start obsessing, she revisited that mantra. “It gave me some sense of control,” she says. “I think that’s a big part of scanxiety. I’m at the mercy of these techs, I don’t know what the machine’s gonna do, I don’t know what the results are going to be and I can’t change them, but I’m not willing to be there terrified.”

Goldberg has installed the meditation app Calm on her phone and does meditation and deep breathing exercises. (For techniques to breathe better, see [Solutions.](#))

Ella Maslin Fink, who had thyroid cancer, reduced her anxiety through meditation: “Truly, it has been so much internal work to get where I am.” And Ward will find a mantra or phrase, like “I won’t have the answer today” or “I’m safe today,” to repeat to herself when she finds herself focused on worst-case scenarios.

Dig into other forms of research.

When Rich Sauser, a self-described research junkie, gets anxious about prostate cancer, he just does more research. He’s on active surveillance for prostate cancer, and when his PSA rose recently, he asked the guys in his network how many of them with scores higher than his were still in active surveillance. Quite a few were. “That took my anxiety down a bit,” he says. Ever curious, he joins webinars, listens to podcasts (like the Dr. Geo Prostate Podcast), networks and meets with doctors virtually. He’s found that Facebook hosts a lot of good prostate cancer support groups, “so you can go through those message boards and read what other guys are going through,” he says. “You just gotta take it with a grain of salt because the people are not doctors. But it really helps to know you’re not alone.”

Be kind and listen to yourself.

To lessen her anxiety, Ward has learned to address her specific challenges with gentleness. For difficulty concentrating, for example, she goes easy on herself in terms of how she expects to be productive. And she purposely schedules activities that are fun and engaging and require a lot of focus. When she's feeling stressed and having difficulty sleeping, she's found that mind-body practices, such as massage, yoga or tai chi, are grounding and calming. "Everyone may be different in what helps them feel the most grounded," she says, "but giving yourself the extra time and care to manage your stress can be really supportive."

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