



Ontario Health
Cancer Care Ontario

Symptom Management Algorithm

Anxiety

in Adults with Cancer

Screen for symptoms of anxiety using a validated measure (ESAS-r*)

Use a validated measure such as ESAS-r to assess for anxiety symptoms and monitor treatment response when a patient enters the system, at critical times in disease and/or treatment process, at points of transition (post-treatment survivorship, palliative or end of-life), or during other stressful life course events (life crisis, personal transitions).

Review symptom report(s) with the patient and their caregiver and address any other distressing symptoms that the patient identifies

MILD
ESAS-r (1-3)

MODERATE
ESAS-r (4-6)

SEVERE
ESAS-r (7-10)

ASSESS RISK OF HARM TO SELF AND/OR OTHERS

Determine whether the feelings of anxiety are linked to a medical contributor such as shortness of breath, medication, or any other substances the patient is currently taking

NO

Determine if the patient is under the care of a professional for symptoms of anxiety

YES

NO

Determine if the patient requires further support

YES

Ask the following questions to determine how the anxiety feels and any triggers

1. What **symptoms** are you feeling? (nervous, anxious, on edge, heart beating fast, breathless)
2. Do you feel you may not be able to **stop or control your worries**?
3. Do you feel **easily annoyed or irritable**?
4. Can you tell me what you think is causing these feelings, any **triggers**?

NO

Ask the following questions to determine (or clarify) the **frequency and severity** of anxiety

1. How long have you been feeling anxious... has this persisted more than 2 weeks?
2. Is the anxiety affecting daily functioning... has this persisted more than 2 weeks?
3. Is this anxiety affecting your sleep or mood... has this persisted more than 2 weeks?

YES TO AT LEAST ONE

MILD

Continue to Respond to Mild Symptoms of Anxiety (below)

MODERATE

Further assessment for other contributing factors

SEVERE

Refer to PSO or appropriate mental health specialist

Sometimes when people experience significant mood fluctuations, they can have thoughts of ending their life. Are you having these thoughts? Is there a chance you would do something to end your life?

ASSESS RISK OF HARM THROUGHOUT & FOLLOW EMERGENCY PROTOCOL

MILD

MODERATE

SEVERE

Responding to mild symptoms of anxiety

Normalize feelings of anxiety and provide education verbally plus any relevant materials (such as Patient Symptom Management Guides) about:

- How common anxiety is in the context of cancer and differing responses
- Coping with stress and specific strategies (i.e. relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness)
- The benefits of support groups and other support services, as well as sources of informal support, resources available to patients and families (e.g., accommodation, transportation, financial assistance, additional health/drug benefits)
- How to effectively manage symptoms contributing to anxiety (e.g., pain, tension)
- The importance of additional psychosocial support if signs and symptoms of anxiety worsen

* Refer the patient for additional support if necessary or desired by the patient to manage anxiety.

Determine if other contributing factors are present

- If the patient lives alone and is unable to identify a support system (friends/family)
- If there are any other current life stressors (unrelated to cancer diagnosis) that may be contributing
- History of anxiety (e.g., panic attacks, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), depression, other mental health problems)
- Currently taking medication for anxiety or depression or seeing a mental health specialist
- Disease recurrence, advanced or progressive disease
- Substance use or withdrawal

NO CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

ONE OR MORE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS IDENTIFIED

REFER TO PSYCHOSOCIAL ONCOLOGY OR APPROPRIATE MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST FOR FURTHER ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT

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Disclaimer

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