

How you look and feel

Cancer can change both your physical appearance and how you feel about yourself. This can be really difficult to cope with. After all, lots of young people feel insecure about how they look, without the additional worries around losing their hair, weight gain/loss and other changes caused by cancer and its treatment.

This information sheet explores how you can deal with some of these changes and feel better about yourself during this time.

It's good to talk

Try to share your feelings with someone you trust. This could be a family member or partner, or a teacher or employer, or one of your friends. Alternatively, you may find it easier to talk to your social worker, youth worker, a nurse or someone in your psychological support team.

Sharing your worries

"I'm afraid I'll look horrible without my hair."

You may have heard that cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy, result in hair loss. While this is true in some cases, not everyone who has these treatments loses their hair. Even if you do, with chemotherapy, your hair will usually grow back three to six months after your treatment ends.

If you are having radiotherapy on your head, there may be a small area of hair which won't grow back – but this can usually be covered up by the rest of your hair.

If it is going to happen, your hair will start falling out within a few weeks of your first treatment. You'll see strands of hair on your pillow in the mornings, in your hairbrush or in the shower, and you may find you have an itchy scalp. You may also lose your eyebrows and eyelashes, as well as your body hair.

You might feel anxious about going out in public at first, but it's worth being brave for the sense of normality it can bring. You may feel more confident if you cover your head with a wig, hat or scarf.

Some girls also find that wearing make-up and jewellery, painting their fingernails, and experimenting with false eyelashes helps them feel better when they're heading out.

Useful tip: If you're going out in the sun, wear a high-factor sunscreen on your head as well as a hat – after all, your scalp has never been completely exposed to the sun before.

"I feel really self-conscious about my central line."

If you're having chemotherapy, the doctors may put in a central line to help carry the drugs into your bloodstream. This extra tube may seem very obvious to you, but if you wear baggy clothes, others are unlikely to notice it. You may like to treat yourself to a new t-shirt or jumper that hides your central line and boosts your confidence when you're out and about.

"I used to love my food, but I just can't eat."

You might find that your eating habits are changed by your illness, treatment or medication. You may feel like you want to throw up or that you can't keep anything down. Your mouth may be dry or sore, making it hard to chew or swallow. Your sense of taste may have also been affected and even your favourite food may seem inedible!

How you look and feel

To fight your cancer you need to continue to eat and maintain your levels of energy, so we have put together these tips to help with some of the issues you may have.

Our information sheet *Eating well*, gives more information and suggestions. Ask your CLIC Sargent care professional for a copy, or download it from our website.

Feel sick?

- Avoid strong smells and get some fresh air if possible
- Try to eat little and often
- Avoid greasy food
- Choose warm or cold food rather than hot meals
- Eat and drink more slowly than usual
- Try peppermint or ginger tea, mint sweets or ginger biscuits
- Ask your doctor or nurse for anti-sickness medicines.

Sore or dry mouth?

- Avoid salty or spicy foods
- Choose soft and smooth foods, like ice-cream and shepherd's pie
- Try puréeing your foods, if necessary
- Ask about medicines that could help.

Tasteless food?

- Eat food with a strong taste, like marmite or spicy sausages
- Suck mints or fruit sweets to lose the bad taste in your mouth
- Add extra herbs and spices to pep up the taste
- Eat a wide range of food, until you find you get it right!
- If you are taking drink supplements, put them in the freezer for a while before you take them. They taste better if they are almost frozen.

"I just want to eat all the time."

If your treatment involves steroids, you can feel very hungry and constantly want to eat. You may be worried about putting on weight. But if you do, remember this hunger is only temporary and your appetite will get back to normal when the steroid treatment stops.

In the meantime, do your best to eat a healthy range of food because you need to be as fit as you can to fight cancer.

- Talk to the dietician at your hospital and ask for some recommendations, including foods you should avoid
- Try and take some exercise whenever you feel you have the energy, even if it's just a short walk around the shops
- Ask the hospital physiotherapist for some exercises
- Talk to your nurse, social worker or youth support worker. They can tell you what has worked for other people in a similar situation.

How you look and feel

"I'm afraid no one will ever fancy me again."

If you're currently going out with someone, you may be worried that they'll stop finding you attractive, or that they're only staying with you because they feel sorry for you. The only way to find out the truth is to ask them, and talk about how you feel. You might find that they are really supportive. But even if you don't get the answer you were hoping for, at least it will be the start of an open, honest discussion.

Remember, your cancer will put a strain on your partner as well. They will worry about you and about what will happen in the future. You may want to warn them that you could have mood swings or feel depressed sometimes. Ask one of the team of people caring for you for a leaflet to give them that explains about your cancer and treatment.

If you're not going out with someone right now, you may be worrying about telling a future partner that you've had cancer and wondering how they will react. You may feel that, because of your cancer, you've lost your confidence in chatting to someone you fancy.

There's no one right way to approach a new relationship, so the best idea is to just give it a try. The more you talk to people, the more you'll find out what works for you. And if a potential boyfriend or girlfriend is put off by the fact you've had cancer, they're probably not the right person for you.

Ref: SER031

Version: 2

Reviewed and updated: August 2011

Next review and update: 2013

For information about the sources used to put this publication together, or if you have any comments or queries about it, please contact us on 0300 330 0803 and ask to speak to the information manager.

www.clicsargent.org.uk

Registered charity number 1107328 and registered in Scotland (SC039857)

Do you have more questions, or need some help?

CLIC Sargent has been working with young people for over 20 years, and we understand what you're going through. Our care professionals include social workers, youth support workers and nurses, who provide clinical, practical and emotional support. Talk to your CLIC Sargent care professional, or call us on **0300 330 0803*** and we'll put you in touch with someone who can help.

You can also visit our website at www.clicsargent.org.uk or email us on info@clicsargent.org.uk

* Calls to 03 numbers are charged in the same way as calls to a geographic (01 or 02) number. Check your phone contract to see how much you pay for this type of call - it may be included in 'inclusive minutes'.

