

Scanxiety

'Scanxiety' is a term commonly used to describe the anxiety experienced by people affected by melanoma in the lead up to a medical appointment, scan or test, and/or while waiting for the results.



In this article we explain more about scanxiety and share some tips for coping.

Scanxiety is a very common and normal feeling for people affected by melanoma and can affect their loved ones too. It affects people across different stages of melanoma, regardless of whether their scans are for melanoma diagnosis, treatment monitoring, or as part of a routine check-up.

WHY does scanxiety occur?

When faced with a potential threat, our bodies activate a survival mechanism to keep us safe. This is commonly experienced as anxiety. For example, if we were confronted with a ferocious animal (e.g. a tiger), our body would initiate the fight or flight response (a series of physical and behavioural changes) with the goal of helping us survive. These changes would efficiently 'pump up' our bodies to fight the ferocious animal or to flee as fast as possible from the dangerous situation.

While there is no immediate external threat (such as an attack by a ferocious animal) present for scanxiety, for many people affected by melanoma the potential to receive bad news from appointments, scans or tests can trigger a similar fight/flight response.

During this time, people often imagine obtaining bad test results, with often the worst-case scenario coming to mind.

WHEN does scanxiety occur?

For people affected by melanoma, scanxiety often occurs in the 1-2 weeks leading up to an appointment. During this time, they may find themselves thinking increasingly about their upcoming appointment and the results.

Scanxiety usually peaks in the 24-48 hours prior to the appointment, with people affected by melanoma commonly reporting that they find it difficult to think about anything else and are not able to sleep the night prior to the appointment and/or receiving results.

Should good results be received, some people affected by melanoma can feel relief immediately or for others it may take a day or so for their mind to go back to its usual thinking. If the results are not as hoped, it may take some time (about a week) to adjust to the news. This time may be longer if there is a wait to hear from doctors about the treatment plan.

However, for many people affected by melanoma, once a treatment plan has been obtained, the scanxiety usually reduces to manageable levels.

What can I do to cope with scanxiety?

If you find that you are having difficulties managing scanxiety, remember you are not alone. Here are some tips to help you cope:



- **Expect some anxiety** in the lead up to or while waiting for appointments, scans or test results. This takes away some of the surprise and/or panic from when scanxiety occurs. Practice noticing and labelling the scanxiety; you could say to yourself 'Ah, there is the anxiety I was expecting that usually occurs before I have my check-up appointment'.

- **Avoid Dr Google.** Instead write down questions that you would like to ask your specialist at your next appointment to obtain answers specific to your medical circumstances.

- **Plan your week.** It may be helpful to make a plan for the 1-2 weeks prior to your scan or as you wait for test results, knowing it could possibly be a stressful time. Include in your plan some enjoyable activities, time to rest and ways to reduce expectations on yourself.

- **Focus on the important things.** Scanxiety often takes our thinking into the future worst-case scenario. Instead, turn your attention to the important things you need to do in the here and now (e.g., completing a task from your to-do list or playing with your kids).

- **Get support.** Talk to a family member or friend about how you are feeling. Alternatively, some people find it helpful to connect and speak with others who may have experienced scanxiety through a melanoma support group.

- **Calming activities.** Identify activities that help to calm and ground you on the day of the appointment or when obtaining results. This might include taking a moment to enjoy the taste

of a morning tea treat, completing an activity mindfully or listening to a playlist of songs that help you focus on something more pleasant.

- **Create a coping statement.**

Write down some helpful thoughts to remind yourself of when worries arise. For example,

'There is no point now guessing what the doctor will say, I will find out the outcome of my scan/test/appointment on Friday' or 'Regardless of the outcome I will get through this'.

- **Reward yourself.** Plan something to look forward to as a reward for being courageous and getting through the medical appointment and/or obtaining test results.

- **Talk to your doctor.** Tell your specialist or GP if you are finding it difficult to cope with your scanxiety; they may be able to refer you for some psychological support.

PATIENT RESOURCES

- Melanoma Institute Australia has more support resources available:

melanoma.org.au/for-patients/patient-support

- Melanoma Patients Australia offers peer-to-peer support and support groups: melanomapatients.org.au

- 'Tips to Implement Mindfulness into Your Everyday Routine' blogpost: cancerqld.org.au