How to choose a doctor - Worksheet

If you have been told you have cancer, the next step is for you to make sure you get the best possible medical care and treatment. You can get names of cancer doctors (oncologists) from the doctor who diagnosed your cancer, but in the end, the choice is yours. Choosing your doctor is one of the most important decisions you will make.

The American Medical Association (AMA) Web site (www.ama-assn.org) has a doctor locator service called *Doctor Finder*. It gives you a lot of information about doctors, such as their contact information, medical school, residency training, and specialty area(s).

Another source of information is the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), on the Web at www.asco.org. They provide an oncologist directory, which is a database of ASCO members called the *Membership Directory*. You can sign in with a guest username and password to access this database.

You might also contact the nearest cancer centers and ask for doctors who are specialists in your type of cancer. Many hospitals and offices have physician referral lines and Web sites you can use to find the answers to the questions listed here. Also try using the professional organizations mentioned above. Consider asking family, friends, nurses, and other doctors in your community, too.

Here are some questions to think about as you look for a doctor that best meets your needs. If you would like to learn more, please see our document *Choosing a Doctor and Hospital*.

Doctor's name:

Phone number:

Address/location:

Questions to ask

Are you board certified?

Board certification means that a doctor has had special training in a certain area and has taken certification exams given by doctors in the specialty. To keep the certification, doctors must keep up with continuing education after passing the exam. Specialists who have reached a higher level of achievement have the title of Fellow. To find out if a doctor is board certified, contact the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) at www.abms.org.

What is your specialty?

The specialty will depend on the nature of the medical situation. For example, if radiation therapy is recommended, you will need to see a radiation oncologist. A gynecologic oncologist is best if you need surgery for ovarian cancer.

Do you have a subspecialty?

Subspecialists have a strong focus on part of the specialty in which they trained. For instance, within medical oncology, there may be a subspecialist who works mostly with liver cancer patients. For reconstructive surgery after mastectomy, there are surgeons who specialize in breast reconstruction.

How long have you been in practice?

Experience is key. Years in practice are one measure, but the number of procedures performed or people treated for cancer is also important. Because doctors doing research have usually published their findings in medical journals, you might ask for copies of articles to learn about their philosophy and approach. You may also be able to read the articles online, such as through the National Library of Medicine's PubMed Web Site at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed.]

How many patients with my type of cancer have you treated in the past year?

Experience is important, but keep in mind that the number of people treated for a particular type of cancer will also depend on how common the cancer is.

Are you or others in your practice involved in clinical trials?

You might want to enter a clinical trial, if possible. If your doctor offers clinical trials, this is a sign of a certain level of academic/clinical expertise.

What are your office hours? What is the usual wait for a patient to be seen?

You want hours that are flexible and fit with your schedule. Ask if the office is open late or on weekends. If the wait averages 2 hours, you may want to consider a less crowded practice.

How can I reach you outside of office hours?

You need a simple and easy-to-use way to reach your doctor during off-office hours. You should have access to coverage by a competent oncologist at all times; one who can speak with you directly about your medical problem. Most practices have a doctor on call to take calls from patients 24 hours a day.

Who cares for your patients when you are on vacation?

Your doctor’s office should tell you when your doctor is going on vacation if you are being seen on a regular basis. The covering doctor's background, experience, and credentials should be much like those of your primary doctor. Your doctor may have a nurse practitioner on staff who can talk with you when the doctor is away. You may ask that he or she be part of your care, too.

Who else will be on my health care team?

You should have at least a nurse and maybe a social worker on your health care team. You might want to introduce yourself to the entire team for any future needs. If the doctor visit is typically 3 minutes long and the nurse visit is 30 minutes, you need to decide if you are OK with that.

What hospitals are you affiliated with? Which do you use for your cancer patients?

Know which hospitals your doctor can use. What are the hospital's local reputations? This is where you would go for surgery or other care. Make sure your insurance company allows you to use one of these hospitals.

If I get sick, can I be directly admitted to the hospital under your recommendation without having to go through the emergency room?

Is the hospital easy for you to get to?

May I bring someone with me to my appointments?

If I am in the hospital, may I bring a family member to stay with me? What is the hospital's visiting policy?

You will want to know if loved ones are welcome as support throughout your cancer experience.

Do you accept my health insurance?

Notes

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society
1 · 800 · ACS-2345 or www.cancer.org