



## Talking With Your Doctor

### **You must be able to talk with your doctor to get what you need**

Being treated for cancer often means that you will have more than one doctor. You may even have a team of doctors, nurses, and other people taking care of you. You may get information from many of these people, but it's a good idea to pick one doctor to be the one you go to with questions. You may choose the doctor you see most often, but some people pick a different one.

You should feel at ease with your doctor. But sometimes, it takes a little time and work before this happens. Take the time to ask your questions and make your concerns known. Likewise, your doctor should make the time to answer your questions and listen to your concerns. If you and your doctor feel the same way about sharing information and making choices, you will probably have a good relationship and your needs will be met.

### **Ask yourself, "How much do I want to know?"**

Having an idea of how much you want to know is the first step toward feeling good about talks with your doctor.

You may want to know a lot of medical details about your illness. Some people feel more in control of what is happening to them when they know all of the facts. Decide how much detail about the cancer and your treatment would be helpful, and let your doctor know.

You may want only small amounts of information. Some people get upset when they are told too many details. They may want simple directions -- what pill to take or what their treatment will be and when it will be done. They feel overwhelmed by medical details and would rather leave most decisions to the doctor.

You may want to discuss everything. Some people want to talk about the pros and cons of all the options before they choose and start treatment. They find reliable sources of

information and learn all they can about what is going on. They try to fully understand their cancer and what they can expect.

Don't be afraid to tell your doctor how much or how little you want to know.

## Giving and getting information

Each person has his or her own way of sharing information. That's why the perfect doctor for one person may not be a good match for another. Think about what you value in a doctor. Some people want a doctor who will share information in a clinical and business-like manner. Facts, knowledge, and excellent treatment may be what they're looking for. They expect their doctor to be the medical expert rather than a friend.

Other people want their doctors to have an excellent "bedside manner." They value a doctor who is aware of both their emotional health and medical needs. They want a doctor who feels more like a friend than a "boss" or business partner.

After you have thought through what you want as a patient, it is time to look at how you can best talk with the doctor you have chosen.

## Asking questions

Write down your questions as they come up between visits and take them to your next appointment. Here are some questions your doctor can usually answer for you. Keep in mind that the nurses and other members of your health care team can answer many of your questions, too.

- What do I have? (What is my diagnosis?)
- What treatment do you recommend?
- Are there other treatments?
- What are the benefits of these treatments?
- What are the risks?
- What medicines are you giving me? What are they for?
- How should I expect to feel during treatment?
- What side effects, if any, can I expect to have?
- What can be done about the side effects?

When your doctor gives you instructions, write them down. Make sure you understand them before you leave the office. You will need to follow them exactly. You may also want to keep written notes on any health questions and concerns. Bring your notes with you to appointments to help you remember what you wanted to ask or tell your doctor.

Here are other things you may want to discuss with your doctor before and during treatment:

- How will treatment affect the things in my life that are important to me? For example, will the disease or the treatment keep me from working or from caring for my family? How will I cope if I live alone? Will I be able to have children after treatment? Will I have any physical problems? Again, ask your doctor if you want more information about your treatment. Ask if there is written information you can take with you.
- Is it OK to wait to start treatment? Maybe you have a vacation, wedding, graduation, or other big event you want to go to before starting treatment. Or maybe you feel like your doctor is waiting too long to do your surgery or start your radiation or chemo. You may feel as if every day that goes by is one lost when you could have been fighting the cancer. Talk to your doctor about this. It may be safe to put off treatment for a short time. And in some cases it is best to take time to get as much information as you can about your overall health and the cancer in order to know which treatment is best for you.
- What is the best time to call if I have a question? Some doctors have a special time to return calls. Expect your doctor to call you back, but remember that a quick response may not be possible if another patient is having a crisis. And many times a nurse can answer your questions, too.
- Who else gets information about me? Is there another doctor who should be kept informed? You may also want your doctor to be able to talk with your spouse, family members, or loved ones about your condition. Think about your choices and tell your doctor what you want. You may have to sign a form giving the doctor permission to talk to certain people. For more information on patient privacy, see our document [What Is HIPAA?](#)
- Always tell your doctor about any effects from your treatment or from the cancer itself. Physical symptoms can be very important for your doctor to know about during (and even after) treatment. People with cancer may have trouble with pain, breathing, sleeping, nausea, appetite, their bowels, feeling tired, or other problems. Many discomforts can be prevented or made less of a problem with help from your doctor. Tell the doctor:
  - What kind of symptom you are having and exactly how it feels
  - The time of day you usually notice this symptom
  - How bad it is
  - Where you feel it in your body
  - How long it lasts
  - What, if anything, makes the symptom better or worse
  - In what way or ways it affects or interferes with your daily life

- If you keep having problems, let your doctor know what works and what doesn't. Most people have to try more than one way to get symptoms under control.
- If you feel sad, overwhelmed, or hopeless a lot of the time and these feelings don't go away, bring this up with your doctor. There are many kinds of emotional distress that go with cancer and its treatment. You may have a problem that can be treated. See our document called *Distress in People With Cancer* for more details.

Above all, your doctor should take your questions seriously. He or she should be interested in your concerns and not make you feel rushed. If your doctor does not respond this way, bring it up at your next visit.

## Remembering what your doctor says

It's hard to understand complex information when you are anxious or afraid. And sometimes, without knowing it, doctors use words their patients don't understand. If you don't understand something, ask your doctor to explain it to you.

Even if the doctor carefully explains things, you may not hear or remember all that is said. Here are some ways to help you remember everything your doctor tells you. Decide which way will be best for you.

- Take notes on what your doctor says.
- Ask if you can record your talks.
- Take a family member or friend there with you. He or she can remind you of questions you want to ask and help you remember what the doctor said. You may want to take along the person who talks to your family about how you are doing. This will keep that person informed and help your family feel included. It will also keep you from having to answer a lot of questions. You may want your family's help in making decisions, so keeping them up to date is a good idea.

## The doctor-patient relationship

A good doctor-patient relationship is a 2-way street. Here are some ways you can help keep up your end of the relationship:

- Tell your doctor about any changes in your body and how it is working -- from sleep and bowel habits to headaches. Make notes so you can tell your doctor everything.
- Ask your doctor what changes you should call about during office hours and which ones would need an emergency call during times when the office is closed.
- Discuss your concerns about how cancer will affect your life. Be honest about your habits -- even if they're habits that you may not be proud of, like smoking. Never hold back information. Something you think is minor could affect your treatment. Or something you think is serious might be easily relieved.

- Make a list of all your questions, and take it with you to your doctor visits. Don't be ashamed or shy about asking these questions. There is no such thing as a "dumb" question. Check the list of questions above for some ideas, and then add your own.

Be sure your doctor has a copy of your most recent instructions on the care you want if you become unable to make decisions for yourself. These instructions are called advance directives. If you would like to learn more, call us at 1-800-227-2345 and ask for *Advance Directives*.

## The doctor-patient relationship when you're in the hospital

If you are in the hospital, your relationship with your doctor will change somewhat. Many other people will be involved in your care during this time. And your doctor may not be the only one making treatment decisions.

Sometimes hospital policies and routines clash with your own. In the hospital, you will also be surrounded by noise and activity, which can be stressful in itself. Some of this can't be avoided, but you can bring up problems with the nurses who are caring for you. They can offer ideas about ways to deal with these changes, and how the staff can help meet your needs. Keep in mind that your doctor may also be able to help you solve problems that might come up as you adjust to hospital routines and practices.

If you have a problem with your doctor while you are in the hospital, there are other people who may be able to help. Speak to your nurse, talk to a social worker, or ask if the hospital has a patient service representative on staff. They can give you support and help you organize your thoughts before talking with your doctor. With your permission, they might even speak directly with your doctor.

## Don't be afraid to talk to your doctor

Your doctor and the rest of your health care team want to help you and support you through this time. And people who have cancer likely to want to build good relationships with their doctors. A good relationship doesn't just happen -- it takes care and effort on both sides. Try to figure out your needs and how to best talk to your doctor about them. Work together. Chances are you'll both benefit from it.

## Getting a second opinion

Cancer treatment is so complex, and some people don't know where to start asking questions. But they may wonder if another doctor might offer something different in the way of treatment. You may find that you want to talk with another doctor who can look at your test results, talk with you about your personal situation, and maybe give you a different take on it.

Some people find it hard to tell their doctors that they'd like a second opinion. It may help you to know that it is common for patients to get a second opinion, and most doctors are comfortable with the request. In fact, some insurance companies require you to get one

before you start treatment. If you are unsure of how to begin, here are some ways that may help you bring it up with your doctor.

- "Before we start treatment, I'd like to get a second opinion. Will you help me with that?"
- "If you had my type of cancer, who would you see for a second opinion?"
- "I think that I'd like to talk with another doctor to be sure I have all my bases covered."
- "I'm thinking of getting a second opinion. Can you recommend someone?"

You can ask your doctor to refer you to someone, as suggested above. You may also want to look at our document, *Choosing a Doctor and a Hospital* for other ideas.

Once you have decided who you will see for your second opinion, ask that your medical records, original x-rays, and all test results be shared with the new doctor. This way you won't have to repeat them. You will probably need to ask the doctor's office staff to help you with this. You may need to sign a release of information form to have the records sent. Or you may want to take copies of your medical records to the new doctor yourself.

## If you have a problem talking with your doctor

If you have problems talking with your doctor, there are often ways to make things better. Try working out your concerns before deciding the situation is hopeless.

First, state your concern as honestly and openly as you can. Here are some ways you may want to think about starting the conversation:

- "I'm concerned that we aren't communicating well, and here's why ..."
- "I need to be able to talk with you about \_\_\_\_\_, and I feel like I can't. Can we discuss this?"
- "I realize that you're very busy, but I need to discuss \_\_\_\_\_ with you. Can we schedule a time to do that?"
- "I'm having trouble understanding \_\_\_\_\_. Can you help me?"

If you need more details after your doctor answers a question, say so. Sometimes it's even helpful to ask the same question again in a different way. Unless you tell your doctor that you don't understand something, he or she will probably think that you do. There's nothing wrong with telling your doctor that you don't understand. If you want to learn more about your cancer treatment, ask your doctor to suggest some reading materials. Keep in mind that nurses can be great sources of information, too. Learning more about your treatment can help you become more actively involved in it.

If you are unable to work out the problem with your doctor during regular visits, ask for a special visit to discuss it. If the issue concerns your cancer treatment, go to the meeting

with as much information as possible. You can call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit our Web site at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) for more information about your type of cancer and its treatment. Always tell your doctor where you got your information and then ask for his or her opinion.

Even if you feel frustrated or angry, try to avoid being hostile toward your doctor. Often people become defensive and withdraw when they feel attacked -- a response that will be not be helpful in the long run. State your concerns and questions clearly and honestly, without accusing.

What should you do if you feel you have done your part but the situation has not improved? You might think about talking with a third party about the problem. The head nurse or your family doctor might be willing to discuss the matter with the doctor. Sometimes this is less stressful than facing the doctor directly, and their help could improve the situation.

If not, it may be time to find a new doctor. Don't stay with a doctor only to protect his or her feelings. Just because you were referred to the doctor does not mean you can't decide to change on your own. It's your body and you have the right to find the best doctor for you.

## **Information from your doctor that you will need later**

At some point -- even if you don't change doctors before or during treatment -- you are likely to find yourself in the office of a new doctor. It is important that you be able to give your new doctor the exact details of your diagnosis and treatment. Make sure you have the following information handy and always keep copies for yourself:

- A copy of your pathology report from any biopsy or surgery
- If you had surgery, a copy of your operative report
- If you were in the hospital, a copy of the discharge summary that every doctor must prepare when patients are sent home
- If you had radiation, a final summary of the dose and field
- Since some drugs can have long-term side effects, a list of all your drugs, drug doses, and when you took them

You can usually ask your treating doctor's office staff for copies of your records. Keep in mind that doctors sometimes move and offices can close, so ask for your records sooner rather than later. If the treatment or test took place in a hospital, you will need to contact their medical records department to find out how to get these records. Hospitals do dispose of records after a certain length of time, so don't delay. This is the kind of information you will want to keep the rest of your life, since almost any doctor you see in the future will need it.

# Additional resources

## More information from your American Cancer Society

The following related information may also be helpful to you. These materials may be ordered from our toll-free number or found on our Web site.

Choosing and Doctor and a Hospital (also available in Spanish)

Health Professionals Associated With Cancer Care

Patient's Bill of Rights (also available in Spanish)

Advance Directives

Distress in People With Cancer

Anxiety, Fear, and Depression

What is HIPAA?

Informed Consent (also available in Spanish)

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With Diagnosis

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society  
1 · 800 · ACS-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)