The Doctor-Patient Relationship

It’s important to feel at ease with your doctor. How well you are able to talk with your doctor is a key part of getting the care that’s best for you.

It’s also important to discuss your concerns about how cancer will affect your life and the things you do. Never hold back information. Be honest about your habits – even if you’re not proud of them, like smoking or drinking.

Taking an active role in your cancer treatment can help you get the best care from the team of doctors, nurses, and other health care providers taking care of you. Each person has skills that you may need. They can answer your questions, support you and your family, and help you find people and places near you that can give you more help.

How much do I want to know?

Deciding how much you want to know about the cancer and its treatment is the first step in being able to talk comfortably with your doctor.

You may want to discuss everything about the cancer. Some people feel more in control of what’s happening to them when they know all of the facts. They try to fully understand their cancer, their treatments, and what they can expect.

Maybe you just want small bits of information. Some people get upset when they are given too many details at once. They feel overwhelmed by medical details and would rather leave most decisions to the doctor.

Don’t be afraid to tell your doctor how much or how little you want to learn.
Giving and getting information

Each doctor has his or her own way of helping patients learn about cancer and cancer treatment. Some doctors and patients are better listeners than others. That’s why the perfect doctor for one person may not be a good match for another. Good communication is the key.

Think about what you need and want from a doctor. Be sure to tell your doctor what you’d like from him or her.

Remembering what the doctor says

It’s hard to remember all of the things you’re told at each doctor’s visit, especially when you’re anxious or afraid.

Even if the doctor carefully explains things, you may not hear or remember all that’s said. Here are some ways to help you remember everything your doctor tells you.

- Take notes on what your doctor says.
- Ask if you can record your talks.
- Take a family member or friend with you. They can help remind you of questions to ask and take notes for you.

Make sure you understand any instructions you’ve been given before you leave the office.

If you have questions between doctor visits, write them down as they come up. Keep a notebook to help you stay organized. Remember that other members of your cancer care team can answer many of your questions, too.

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. There’s nothing wrong with telling your doctor that you don’t understand. If you want to learn more about the cancer or your cancer treatment, ask your doctor to suggest some reading materials or trusted websites. You can also visit our website or speak to one of our cancer information specialists 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-227-2345.

Basic information

Don’t be ashamed or shy about asking questions. There’s no such thing as a “dumb”
question. Here are some basic questions that could help you talk to your doctor and start learning about cancer and the choices you’ll have to make.

- What type of cancer\(^1\) do I have? (What is my diagnosis?) You may want to ask them to write it down for you.
- What is my cancer’s stage\(^2\)? What does it mean for me?
- What treatment\(^3\) do you recommend?
- Are there other treatments?
- What are the benefits of these treatments?
- What are the risks?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- How long will I need treatment?
- What medicines will I get? What are they for?
- How should I expect to feel during treatment?
- What side effects\(^4\), if any, can I expect to have?
- What can be done about the side effects?
- Can I work during treatment?
- Will I be able to have children after treatment?

We have more detailed question lists\(^5\) that you might also find helpful.

**Other things you may want to ask about**

Here are some other things you may want to talk with your doctor about:

**Contact numbers**

What’s the best time to call if I have a question? Some doctors have a special time to return calls. Many times a nurse can answer your questions, too.

**Emergency contact numbers**

Where do I call if I have a serious problem? What about after office hours, on holidays, or on weekends? **Be sure you know how to get help any time you might need it.** 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.

**Your medical information**
Who else gets information about my health? Do my other doctors need to know about my cancer? You may also want your doctor to talk to your spouse, family members, or loved ones about your illness. You may have to sign a form giving your doctor the go-ahead to talk to certain people.

Getting a second opinion

When you’re facing cancer treatment, it’s normal to wonder if another doctor might offer a different treatment. Getting a second opinion can help you feel more sure about your diagnosis and treatment plan. Your doctor can help you find another doctor and/or get together the information you need to get a second opinion. Learn more in Seeking a Second Opinion⁶.

Advance directives

If you have an advance directive or living will, be sure your doctor has a copy. If you don’t have any, your doctor can talk to you about how to create a legal document that contains instructions on the care you want if you become unable to make decisions for yourself. Learn more in Advance Directives⁷.

Side effects

Ask your doctor what problems you should watch for and always tell your doctor about any side effects⁸ that you have. 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 problem (symptom) you are having
- The time of day you notice the symptom
- How bad it is
- Where you feel it in your body
- How long it lasts
- What, if anything, makes it better or worse
- How does it affect your daily life

If you keep having side effects after being treated for them, let your doctor know what works and what doesn’t. Many people have to try more than one way to get side effects under control.
If you feel sad, overwhelmed, or hopeless a lot of the time and these feelings don’t go away, tell your doctor. There are many kinds of emotional distress that go with cancer and its treatment. See Distress in People With Cancer for more details.

**Who to talk to about concerns if you’re in the hospital**

If you need to go in the hospital, other health providers will also be involved in your care. And your cancer doctor may not be the only one making treatment decisions.

Sometimes hospital policies and routines may clash with your own. In the hospital, you may be surrounded by noise and activity, which can be stressful. 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 that may help you cope.

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

**Problems in the doctor-patient relationship**

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

First, tell your doctor as honestly and openly as you can what you’re worried about. Here are some ways you may want to think about starting the conversation:

- “I’m worried 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 are unable to work out the problem with your doctor during regular visits, ask for a special visit to discuss it.

If you feel things aren’t getting better, you might think about talking with a third party about the problem. Your family doctor might be willing to discuss the matter with the cancer doctor. Sometimes this is less stressful than facing the doctor directly, and their
help could improve the situation. If it doesn’t, it may be time to find a new doctor. Don’t stay with a doctor to protect his or her feelings. Just because you were referred to a doctor doesn’t mean you can’t decide to change on your own. It’s your body and your health – you have the right to find the best doctor for you.