Seeking a Second Opinion

When you’re facing cancer treatment, it’s normal to wonder if another doctor could offer a different treatment option. You may 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. Getting a second opinion can help you feel more sure about your diagnosis and treatment plan. Decisions about your health should be made after you have learned all you can about your diagnosis, prognosis, and available treatment options.

Why seek a second opinion

Even when you have cancer, very few treatment decisions have to be made right away. You can think about them, and you should think about them. It may help you to know that it’s 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.

There are many reasons for getting a second opinion including:

- You want to be sure you have explored all options
- You think your doctor is underestimating how serious your cancer is
- Your doctor is not sure what is wrong with you
- You have a rare or unusual cancer
- You think another treatment might be available
- Your doctor is not a specialist in your type of cancer
- Your doctor tells you there is uncertainty about the type or extent of cancer you have
- Your doctor gives you a few different treatment options.
- You’re having trouble understanding and communicating with your doctor, or you want your options explained by someone else.
You just want peace of mind that you are making the right choice

**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 that you 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.

- Take notes on what your doctor says.
- Ask if you can record your talks.
- Take a family member or friend there with you.

Even after you have given your doctor a chance to carefully explain your cancer to you, you still may decide getting a second opinion is right for you.

**How to talk to your doctor about getting a second opinion**

Some people find it hard to tell their doctors that they’d like a second opinion. Remember it is common for patients to get a second opinion, and doctors are comfortable with the request. If you are unsure of how to begin, here are a few ways to start the conversation:

- “I’m thinking of getting a second opinion. Can you recommend someone?”
- “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.”

**The second opinion process: what to expect**

Before you start looking for a second opinion, contact your insurance company to find out what your policy covers. In some cases, you may have to get a second opinion from another doctor who is part of your health plan before the plan will pay for your treatment
It’s important to be able to give the new doctor the exact details of your diagnosis and planned 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 prepares when patients are sent home
- A summary of your doctor’s current treatment plan.
- Since some drugs can have long-term side effects, a list of all your drugs, drug doses, and when you took them

You can ask your treating doctor’s office for copies of your records. 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.

**Deciding where to go for a second opinion**

Let your doctor know if you want to get a second opinion. Most doctors understand the value of a second opinion, and they are not offended when a patient wants one. They may even be able to recommend another doctor.

The following are other possible sources to find an oncologist:

- Local hospital, medical clinics or cancer centers
- Medical associations who offer searchable databases of doctors
  - [American Board of Medical Specialties](https://www.abms.org)
  - [American Medical Association](https://www.ama-assn.org)
  - [American College of Surgeons](https://www.facs.org)
  - [American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)](https://www.asco.org)

**Making sense of the second opinion**

If the second opinion differs from the first, you may find the following tips helpful:

- Make an appointment with your first doctor to talk about the second opinion.
- Ask both doctors to explain how they arrived at their treatment plan
- Ask them how they interpreted your test results
- Ask what research studies or professional guidelines they consulted
• Ask what they have recommended to other patients in your same situation
• Ask if it is possible for the two doctors to review your case together
• You might need to get 3rd opinion from another specialist— a pathologist, surgeon, medical oncologist, or radiation oncologist — to talk about the two opinions and give their opinion on your situation.
• You may need to do your own research on the latest treatment guidelines. Two good sources are the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Treatment Guidelines (www.nccn.org) and the National Cancer Institute’s (NCI) PDQ® Cancer Treatment Summaries (www.cancer.gov). Both are available in versions for health professionals (which use medical language and terminology) and patients (which use everyday language).

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