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Choosing a Doctor and a Hospital

When you learn you have cancer, you want to make sure you get the best possible medical care and treatment. Choosing your doctor and treatment center will be one of the most important decisions you'll make. There are many excellent cancer care centers in the United States, but how do you know where to look?

Here are some things to think about as you choose your doctor and hospital.

Quality cancer care

When you find out you have cancer, there are many things to think about and many decisions to make. Most people with cancer are not experts on cancer treatment. You may not feel like you have the time, energy, or resources to figure out how and where to get the best cancer care. You might need some help.

The doctor who found your cancer is the first person you should ask. Try asking this: "If you found out that you or someone you loved had this cancer, which doctor would you go to for treatment?" In many cases, the doctor will suggest another doctor even if you don't ask.

If your doctor isn't sure of your diagnosis, but thinks there's a chance you might have cancer, you can ask: "If you were in my place, which doctor would you see first?" Ask for at least 2 or 3 names, and find out what these [doctors' specialties](#)¹ are. Find out which cancer centers they work with and which health insurance plans they accept.

Some people actually tackle finding a hospital first, and then look for an oncologist who practices there. For people who find a doctor first, most doctors who treat cancer work with hospitals that are good at cancer care.

Choosing a good hospital

Talk with your doctor, and ask other doctors and nurses for their opinions on hospitals in your area. Our [How to Choose a Hospital](#)² worksheet can help you keep track of the information you get.

It's important to find a hospital that has experience treating your type of cancer. For example, larger hospitals may have more experience with different kinds of cancers and offer more services for cancer patients. If you live in a small town, you may need to travel to a larger city to find a center with experience treating your type of cancer.

A bigger hospital might be especially important if you have a rare type of cancer or if you have something unusual occur along with your diagnosis. Larger institutions usually have more experience in treating less common cancers. This advantage may be the key to getting the best possible treatment and could be well worth any extra travel or inconvenience to you in the short term. They may also be more likely to have [clinical trials](#)³ (research studies) you can take part in.

You can also go online to find out if nearby hospitals meet certain quality standards and are accredited by The Joint Commission. Keep in mind, though, that accreditation does not necessarily mean the hospital has expertise in cancer care. Online, [The Joint Commission's Quality Check](#)⁴ allows you to check on the performance of your local health care facility. From their home page, search for your health care organization by its name, zip code, or state. If you don't have Internet access, go to your local public library and ask staff if they can help you, or call the Joint Commission customer service line at 630-792-5800.

These 3 organizations work with cancer centers and can point you to those that offer only the best in cancer care.

Commission on Cancer

The [Commission on Cancer](#)⁵ (CoC) is a program of the American College of Surgeons (ACoS). It approves hospitals or facilities that have committed to provide the best in cancer diagnosis and treatment. Its list of accredited programs includes more than 1,500 cancer centers across the United States.

A good way to judge the quality of cancer care offered at a treatment center is to find out if it has been approved by the CoC. If it has, you know it meets certain standards and offers a range of state-of-the-art cancer services. No matter its size or location, its ability to deliver quality cancer care is constantly monitored by the CoC.

CoC-approved cancer programs are found in many different kinds of hospitals or facilities. They may be in major treatment centers, community hospitals, or other diagnostic and treatment centers.

National Cancer Institute

The [National Cancer Institute \(NCI\)](#)⁶ is part of the US National Institutes for Health. The NCI is dedicated to better understanding, diagnosing, treating, and preventing cancer. Its goal is to support and enhance the quality of clinical cancer research.

The NCI works with nearly 70 cancer centers in the United States. It recognizes 3 levels of cancer treatment centers, ranging from a comprehensive cancer center to the more basic cancer treatment center. These centers are often housed at universities where research is done, but you don't have to take part in research studies to be treated at one of these centers.

You can call us to find out about the NCI-designated Cancer Center nearest to you or go to [National Cancer Institute Cancer Center Programs](#).⁷

Children's Oncology Group

The Children's Oncology Group's mission is to cure and prevent cancer in children and teens through scientific research and comprehensive care. The majority of children and teens with cancer in the United States are treated at centers that are Children's Oncology Group (COG) members.

COG has more than 200 affiliated centers that are linked to a university or children's hospital. You can learn more or find a [COG center](#)⁸ by calling us or going to [Pediatric Cancer Center Information](#).⁹

Choosing a doctor

Going through the process of choosing a doctor can take time. Many people are tempted to rush through this so they can start treatment sooner. Keep in mind, though, that most people with cancer have enough time to be sure that they get the best care possible. Ask the doctor who found your cancer if you need to act right away or whether you can take a short but safe amount of time to check out all your options.

You are looking for a doctor who treats your type of cancer. You may need a special type of oncologist (cancer doctor), or even more than one kind of oncologist for your treatment. There are 3 basic types of cancer treatment doctors:

- Medical oncologists
- Surgical oncologists
- Radiation oncologists

Which ones you will need depends on the kinds of treatment needed for your type of cancer.

During your cancer treatment you may see more than one kind of cancer doctor, but your cancer and treatment type will determine who your main cancer doctor is. Carefully choosing the doctor you need now (such as a good surgeon, radiologist, and/or medical oncologist) will pay off for years to come. Your relationship with this person will probably last through treatment into long-term follow-up care.

Our worksheet called [How to Choose a Doctor](#)¹⁰ may be useful during this process.

Decide what you want and need in a doctor

Before you start looking for a doctor, think about the qualities you want your doctor to have. A few ideas are listed below, but there may be others you want to add.

- Choose a doctor who has **experience treating your type of cancer**. Studies show that doctors have better success treating a condition if they have a lot of experience with it, so this is an important factor.
- You'll need a doctor who is part of your **health plan** (often called a preferred provider) and/or accepts your health insurance.
- Pick a doctor who practices (has privileges) at a **hospital** that you're willing to use. Doctors can only send patients to hospitals where they have admitting privileges.
- Choose a doctor you **feel comfortable** with. Languages spoken, gender, ethnicity, and education may be important to you. You may also have strong feelings about personality and bedside manner. Some people want their doctors to have a business-like manner, while others value a doctor who can help with their emotional health as well as their medical needs. Many people whose illnesses require long-term treatment prefer a friendly relationship with their doctor.

Make a list of doctors who might be a good fit

One of the best ways to choose a doctor is to get referrals from people you trust, like your primary care doctor. You might also try to speak with others in your area who have

been treated for the type of cancer you have to find out who treated them. Some hospitals and communities also have physician referral services available by phone or online. These allow you to learn more about the doctors in your area, such as their areas of expertise, medical certifications, office locations, languages spoken, and so on. You can find these referral services by calling a hospital's main number or visiting their websites.

If you're in a health plan, you can check the names you get against their list of network doctors. This is usually available online or by calling the member services hotline.

Finding out more: calls, appointments, and the first visit

Once you've found doctors that seem like a good fit for you, call their offices and ask if they're on your health insurance plan and are taking new patients. You might also want to find out which hospitals they work in and where they can admit patients.

The next step is to set up appointments with a few doctors. Check with the doctors' offices and your insurance company to find out if this kind of visit is covered. If not, you may end up asking some of these questions on the phone until you've narrowed down your choices.

The most important question to ask them is how much experience they have in treating your type of cancer. If you're meeting with surgeons, find out how often they do the type of surgery you need, how many of these surgeries they have done, and what their success rate is. You may also have to ask how they define "success," depending on the cancer type.

Along with finding out the doctor's medical experience and credentials, notice how comfortable you feel with him or her. One way to measure this is to ask yourself these questions after your appointment.

- Did the doctor give you a chance to ask questions?
- Did you feel the doctor was listening to you?
- Did the doctor seem comfortable answering your questions?
- Did the doctor talk to you in a way that you could understand?
- Did you feel the doctor respected you?
- Did the doctor mention treatment options and ask your preferences about different kinds of treatments?
- Did you feel the doctor spent enough time with you?

Trust your instincts when deciding whether the doctor is right for you. It may take more than one visit before you and your doctor really get to know each other.

Here are some of the things you might want to know about the doctor:

Is the doctor board certified?

Doctors who are board certified have had extra training in special areas, such as medical oncology (cancer care), hematology (diseases of the blood), or gynecologic surgery (female reproductive system). They have taken and passed certification tests approved by doctors in their field. To keep their certification, doctors must continue their education and keep up with advances and changes in their specialty area.

Not all doctors who are specialists are board certified, and doctors don't need to be board certified to be excellent caregivers. Still, many doctors become board certified in at least one specialty.

To find out if a doctor is board certified, contact the [American Board of Medical Specialties](#)¹¹ (ABMS). The ABMS has a list of board certified doctors who subscribe to the ABMS service. You can do a free search for all doctors in a certain specialty by state. Or you can type in the name of the doctor to learn about their specialty. You can also learn more about what board certification means at the ABMS website.

Information on doctors who have extra training and certification may also be available at your public library. Ask for the Official ABMS Directory of Board Certified Medical Specialists, or get your librarian to help you.

What's the doctor's experience?

You might want answers to these questions:

- How long has the doctor been in practice?
- How many people with cancer he or she has treated?
- If you're thinking about surgery or a special procedure, ask about the number of these procedures the doctor has performed.
- How many patients is the doctor currently treating?
- How many are cancer patients?
- How much experience does this doctor have with your type of cancer?

Along with finding out about the doctor's experience, you may also want to find out who

the leading specialists in the field are. A visit to a medical library may be useful. You can do research on the Internet, too. You can start with us, or go to other respected websites like cancer.gov¹², healthfinder.gov¹³, or medlineplus.gov¹⁴. Look for the names of doctors who have written about the cancer you have and whose work is most often quoted. If your doctor has published research, you can look at those articles online or get copies at the library. By doing so, you can learn more about the doctor's approach to cancer treatment.

What hospital(s) does the doctor have privileges with?

More than ever, cancer is treated outside the hospital. Still, a person with cancer might need daily visits to an outpatient treatment center that's linked to a hospital, so the hospital is still important. For some treatments and certain problems, a hospital stay is needed. Where you will get inpatient hospital cancer care depends on where your doctor practices. Find out where you would go for surgery or other care. Check with your health insurance company to see which doctors and hospitals are covered.

Is the doctor affiliated with any medical schools?

Teaching at a respected medical school may suggest that a doctor is a leader in his or her field. Doctors who teach and take care of patients often are in contact with medical experts around the country. They may know more about the latest treatments.

Other questions to ask the doctor:

- Are you or your practice involved in clinical trials (medical studies) of new treatments?
- What are your office hours?
- How can I get help after hours, on weekends, or on holidays?
- Who will see me when you're away?
- Who else will be on my cancer care team?

It's helpful to ask around about a doctor's reputation, but in the end, trust your gut. You should feel comfortable not only with your doctor's ability to treat your cancer but also with how he or she treats you as a person. Can you talk with this doctor? Does he or she listen to you? If it doesn't feel right, keep looking.

Other ways to find or learn more about a doctor

The American Medical Association (AMA) represents many doctors in the US and offers

a free service called [Doctor Finder](#)¹⁵. Through this service, you can find 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). This international medical society represents cancer specialists in clinical research and patient care. They provide an oncologist directory, which is a database of ASCO members called [Find a Cancer Doctor](#)¹⁶.

You might also contact the nearest cancer centers and ask for doctors who are specialists in your type of cancer. Consider asking family, friends, nurses, and other doctors in your community. Most hospitals have a doctor referral service, too. You could also call medical schools or medical societies in your area.

Second opinions

Even after you have chosen your doctor, you may want to get a second opinion. This is good idea if you feel uncertain about the proposed treatment. For instance, if you have prostate cancer and a urologist has recommended surgery, you may want to see a radiation oncologist to learn about non-surgical treatment.

We have more on the steps you can take to get a [second opinion](#)¹⁷ on your cancer treatment plan.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/health-professionals-associated-with-cancer-care.html
2. [/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-hospital-worksheet.pdf](http://content.dam.cancer.org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-hospital-worksheet.pdf)
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html
4. www.qualitycheck.org/
5. <http://www.facs.org/search/cancer-programs>
6. <http://www.cancer.gov>
7. www.cancer.gov/research/nci-role/cancer-centers/find
8. <http://childrensoncologygroup.org/>
9. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/pediatric-cancer-centers.html
10. [/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-doctor-worksheet.pdf](http://content.dam.cancer.org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-doctor-worksheet.pdf)

11. <http://www.abms.org>
12. <http://www.cancer.gov>
13. <http://www.healthfinder.gov>
14. <http://www.medlineplus.gov>
15. <apps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/home.jsp>
16. <http://www.cancer.net/find-cancer-doctor>
17. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/seeking-a-second-opinion.html

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