When Treatment Should Start

Waiting for your cancer treatment to start can bring up strong emotions. If you're experiencing anxiety, sadness, or other kinds of stressful emotions, it may help you to talk with others about it. You might also have questions about the timing of your treatment, such as when treatment will start, if it can or will be delayed, or why it might be OK to wait to start. You might wonder "how long is too long to wait?"

Does cancer treatment always need to be started right away?

Sometimes, it's important to start treatment as quickly as possible, but that's not always the case. Planning cancer treatment\(^1\) can be complex and might take some time, depending on the type and stage of your cancer. There are many factors that will affect when treatment can or should be started. Here are some reasons there are differences in when treatments start.

Treatment might need to be started quickly if:

- You have a type of cancer that needs to be treated right away, like some leukemias, lymphomas, and certain other cancers that tend to be aggressive (grow and spread very fast).
- You have a tumor that's pressing on an organ or other vital part of the body, and treatment is needed to relieve the pressure.

Some people can wait a few weeks or a few months to start treatment because their type of cancer does not tend to grow as fast as others. When treatment doesn't need to start immediately, it might be delayed if:

- You are waiting to get lab results back that will help decide what treatment option is best.
You have already had surgery to remove a tumor, and you need time to recover before starting more treatment.

- You need to make adjustments at home, work, or for child care before starting treatment.
- There are other personal factors and health problems that must be worked around.
- You want more time to get a second opinion.

It’s important to know each person’s case is different. There are many factors that can affect when treatment should, or does, start. Questions about when your treatment should start need to be answered by your cancer care team, because they know your situation best.

What if I have to wait to get an appointment with a cancer doctor (oncologist)?

Some people have trouble getting in to see a cancer doctor as soon as they would like. This might be because there aren’t a lot of cancer doctors in their area, their insurance providers have certain limits, or they don’t have health insurance.

If you are having trouble getting in to see a cancer doctor in your area, start by talking to your primary care provider or the person who diagnosed your cancer. They can help you figure out if it’s okay to wait for an appointment or if you need to look at other options. For people who need to look at other options, check out the tools on Where to Find Cancer Care.

If you are having trouble finding a cancer doctor who is in-network, contact your insurance provider. They might be able to help you find other cancer doctors who could see you sooner.

If you don’t have health insurance, try getting in touch with hospitals in your area. They might offer free or low-cost care or know about resources that could help you. They might also have social workers or other staff who could help you. You may also want to look at health insurance options you might qualify for and resources to help with cancer-related expenses.

If you need to travel to see a cancer doctor, there may be lodging programs that provide free or lower-cost options.

Hyperlinks

References


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