

# Navigate Your Treatment Options

When you are diagnosed with cancer, it is essential to be sure the diagnosis is correct. In many cases, your first step will be to get a second opinion about the pathology of the cancer. Once the diagnosis is confirmed, the next decisions you make are among the most important, because they set the course for the management of your cancer.

Following the diagnosis, you will likely receive a referral to a physician who specializes in cancer care—most often a medical oncologist or hematologist. There is seldom only one treatment option. In fact, for most cancers, there are several equally effective treatment options to consider. For some cancers, referrals to cancer centers or to oncologists who participate in cancer clinical research trials may be your best choice, so one of the questions you should ask is if there are any clinical trials that would be appropriate for you to consider. (Visit [www.cancertrialshelp.org/trialcheck/](http://www.cancertrialshelp.org/trialcheck/) for more information about clinical trials.) Understanding all your options can be overwhelming, but it's very important that you be involved and know what questions to ask. (See Resources. Examples of the kinds of questions to ask your doctor are included on the NCCS Web site in the *How to Make Your Decisions* section.)

## Take an Active Role in Decisions about Your Treatment Options

Even if you're comfortable allowing your doctor to make decisions for you, there are good reasons why you should take the lead in deciding about your care.

First, making a shared decision with your doctor about treatment will help you become a better advocate for your needs. Moreover, playing an active role in your own care can have both physical and emotional benefits. Studies of cancer survivors show that those who are active in making decisions about their cancer treatment tend to manage the side effects of treatment better than those who have little or no knowledge or remain passive about their cancer.

## How to Make Your Decisions

It may be helpful to think of the process of choosing a treatment plan as a series of steps:

- Establish how much time you have to make a decision
- Learn your options
- Weigh the pros and cons for each treatment option
- Consider your own personal situation and the impact each choice is likely to have on your life
- Decide on a course of action

Before you begin discussing options, you should be clear on an important issue: How quickly must you decide on a treatment plan? Do you have time to do more research and talk things over with others, or must you act immediately? Whether your answers bring you more pressure or less, you need to know the time frame for your decision.

Your next step will be to discuss your available treatment options. As your doctor explains each one, here are some questions to raise:

- How successful has this treatment been for other patients?
- What are the pros and cons of this choice?
- What side effects will I be likely to experience during this treatment?
- What long-term effects might occur after treatment has ended?
- What changes can I expect in my lifestyle during treatment?
- Will I or my caregivers need to be aware of any extra care I might require during treatment?
- Does the treatment facility routinely deliver this type of care?
- Will my insurance cover the costs of this treatment? Will there likely be additional services I'll need that my insurance does not cover?

In addition to the treatments your doctor outlines, you may also want to explore two other options: the availability of a clinical trial, which compares a new treatment to a standard treatment being offered by your physician,

and whether there are complementary options that you could use along with your primary treatment. These might include such approaches as massage therapy, nutritional changes, acupuncture, and others.

Keep in mind that you can always seek a second opinion from another doctor. This does not indicate a lack of respect for your doctor—only a desire to thoroughly examine your options.

### Weighing Pros and Cons

Every treatment option has positive and negative aspects. Weighing those pros and cons is a necessary step in deciding which option to choose.

Some of the biggest questions that people have are, “What are my chances of recovery if I choose this treatment over another?” Or, “How much longer can I expect to live if I choose this treatment over another?”

Some doctors respond to this by citing statistics that help you understand the effectiveness of the recommended treatment. Statistical information, sometimes called “data” or “evidence,” can help you sort out your treatment options. But remember that statistics only show what has happened in general in large groups of cancer survivors. Gather the information you feel you need, understand the time you have to make your decision, and let all the pros and cons (including the best available data and your personal circumstances) guide you.



### Resources

NATIONAL COALITION OF CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

“Cancer Survival Toolbox”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/toolbox](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/toolbox)

Visit the following section: *Making Decisions*.

“First Steps”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/first-steps.html](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/first-steps.html)

COALITION OF CANCER COOPERATIVE GROUPS

[www.cancertrialshelp.org/trialcheck](http://www.cancertrialshelp.org/trialcheck)

Information about clinical trials.

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