

Speak Up For Yourself!

For people living with problems related to cancer, effective communication is critical. It's important to talk about your cancer in a way that helps others understand your needs and wishes. So how do you put that into practice? How do you communicate clearly and speak up—or advocate—for your own needs with your health care team and with concerned family members and friends?

During this stressful period, consider these five basic skills:

- 1** Assert yourself. Be clear with others that what you have to say is important.
- 2** Use “I” messages. Make statements with “I” in them, such as “I think” or “I feel.” This is about you. Be your own advocate.
- 3** Listen actively. Make sure that the person to whom you're speaking knows that you are listening carefully—then check to make sure that what you heard is really what the person meant to say.
- 4** Match what you say in words to your body language. For example, you may confuse people if your facial expressions send a message different from what your words are trying to convey.
- 5** Share your emotions. Express your hopes, fears, and concerns with those who are in a position to be helpful to you.

Communicate with Your Health Care Team

Establishing a good relationship with your health care providers is vital. Patience, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of each person's role are key elements. The following are a number of ways you can advocate for yourself and ensure that you are communicating effectively.

- Tell your doctor how much you want to know about your illness. Some people do not wish to know all the details, and some want all available information.
- If you want to be more fully involved in your care, let your doctor or nurse know that you accept responsibility for shared decision-making and want to work in partnership with your health care team.
- Come to your appointments prepared with questions for your doctor and information about how you are feeling. If possible, have someone accompany you to appointments.

This person can take notes and provide feedback about the meeting. If you cannot take someone with you, ask if you can tape the conversation. If you are keeping records about your condition bring them with you to your appointment. It is also helpful to bring a list of medications you are taking that were not prescribed by your oncologist.

- Keep asking questions until you fully understand what your doctor has said. You can't be expected to "get it" all in one explanation, and you may have to ask for clarification several times. Be sure you know whom to call with questions or concerns that arise between visits.
- If you would like to communicate via e-mail, ask if your doctor welcomes that type of communication. Be mindful that important messages should be delivered in person or over the phone—this will ensure the timeliest response.
- If you feel that you and your doctor are not communicating well, discuss this openly. You may find some straightforward solutions, like asking to schedule time to talk further if your doctor seems rushed during your visit.

- Finally, remember that mutual respect is the hallmark of all good relationships—and when you have cancer, a satisfying doctor/patient relationship is essential. Your health care team is there to ensure that you'll always receive the information you need to make informed decisions about your care.

Communicate with Family Members

Speaking with your family members and well-meaning friends can be more stressful than communicating with your health care team. Your family and friends have the greatest investment in your well-being, yet they may be fearful of saying the wrong thing or, in some cases, second-guessing your decisions. At the same time, many cancer patients withhold information because they don't want others to worry, or they simply expect family members to know what to say or do.

With these relationships, the key is to express what you want and need—while doing your best to understand what others are thinking and feeling. If you prefer not to share some details, be clear about your wishes. On the other hand, if you want a certain level of support, make that clear. Everyone benefits from effective communication and an understanding of your needs.



Resources

NATIONAL COALITION OF CANCER
SURVIVORSHIP

“Cancer Survival Toolbox”

www.canceradvocacy.org/toolbox

Visit the following sections:

Communicating, Standing Up

For Your Rights, Making Decisions.

“First Steps”

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

“Teamwork: The Cancer Patient’s Guide To
Talking With Your Doctor”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/
publications/teamwork.pdf](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/teamwork.pdf)

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