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PDF generated on July 28, 2016 from

<http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/making-decisions-about-cancer-treatment>

Making Decisions About Cancer Treatment [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 11/2015



Listen to the Cancer.Net Podcast: [Making Decisions About Cancer Treatment](#) [3], adapted from this content.

After a cancer diagnosis, patients and their families have to make a number of decisions about cancer treatment. These decisions are complicated by feelings of [anxiety](#) [4], unfamiliar words, statistics, and a sense of urgency. However, unless the situation is extremely urgent, take time to research your options, ask questions, and talk with family or a trusted friend.

Decisions about cancer treatment are personal, and you need to feel comfortable with your choices. But, many people don't know where to start. Here are some simple, but important, steps you can take as you start the decision-making process.

Understand your diagnosis

Individual treatment plans depend on the cancer's [type](#) [5] and [stage](#) [6]. So you should learn as much as you can about your specific diagnosis. You may want to ask your doctor [questions](#) [7] about the disease. But be careful when [doing research online](#) [8]. Many sites can be frightening, inaccurate, or misleading. Your doctor or nurse can suggest reputable websites. If you come across unfamiliar words while researching online, ask a member of your health care team to explain or use a [medical dictionary](#) [9].

Know your options

Talk with your doctor about the [treatment options](#) [10] for your type and stage of cancer. Some of these options may include:

- Surgery
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- Hormone therapy
- Active surveillance, also called watchful waiting
- Palliative care
- Participating in a clinical trial

Understand the goals of treatment

Your doctor may use some treatments to slow, stop, or eliminate the cancer. He or she may also use [palliative treatment](#) [11] to manage symptoms and side effects. Ensure your doctor explains to you the goals for your treatment plan and how it will affect you. And make sure it aligns with your personal goals for treatment.

Ask about the side effects of each treatment option

Sometimes cancer can cause long-term effects, or [late effects](#) [12], that might develop months or even years after treatment. Also discuss with your doctor any potential [sexual or reproductive concerns](#) [13], including the risk of not being unable to become pregnant or have children. You have more options to keep your fertility if you address this concern before treatment, instead of waiting until after treatment.

Consider the risks and benefits of each treatment option

Weigh the positives and negatives of each treatment option, including the:

- Chance of a cure
- Potential short- and long-term side effects
- Likelihood the cancer will come back after treatment
- Chances of living longer with or without treatment
- Effect on your quality of life and independence
- Preferences of you and your family

Get a second opinion

Many people [seek a second or even third opinion](#) [14] from another oncologist—and many doctors encourage it. Different oncologists may have different experiences with various treatments. So seeking multiple opinions can help you make a decision or confirm your current treatment plan. First check with your insurance company to find out if your policy covers a specific doctor or health care system.

Find help managing the cost of cancer care

The [cost of cancer care](#) [15] is often high, and you may have unanticipated expenses. Your health care team can help you identify costs related to your treatment options or suggest ways to manage medical and associated costs. They can also refer you to support services that address the financial concerns of people living with cancer.

Consult guidelines or other decision-making tools

The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and other cancer organizations publish guidelines and treatment decision-making tools. These tools help doctors and patients understand various treatment options. Find [summaries of recent guidelines from ASCO](#) [16] and talk with your health care team to see if any apply to your situation.

Discuss your decision with people you trust

Some people find it helpful to talk through their thoughts and concerns with people they trust. This may include:

- Family members
- Friends
- A member of the clergy
- A spiritual advisor
- An oncology social worker
- Another person with cancer

Understand the role of statistics

Your doctor may mention [statistics](#) [17] when describing treatment options. These may include relative survival rates, disease-free survival rates, and progression-free survival rates. These numbers may be a good way to learn how the treatment options differ. But they can't predict how well the treatment will work for you. Your doctor or another member of your health care team can explain how these statistics relate to your treatment.

More Information

[When the Doctor Says "Cancer"](#) [18]

[Managing Your Care](#) [19]

[ASCO Answers Patient Education Materials](#) [20]

[Advanced Cancer Care Planning](#) [21]

Additional Resource

National Patient Advocacy Foundation: [Decoding Clinical Pathways – What Are They, How They Work, and How They Affect Cancer Care](#) [22]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/making-decisions-about-cancer-treatment>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/22968>

- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30336>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25070>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24958>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24514>
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- [16] <http://www.cancer.net/research-and-advocacy/asco-care-and-treatment-recommendations-patients>
- [17] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24961>
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- [21] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25113>
- [22] http://projectinnovation.org/clinical-pathways.php#.VxgMY2Pto_U