Traveling for Cancer Care

For various reasons, people with cancer and their families may decide to travel to receive care. Someâ€"particularly those who reside in rural areasâ€"may have limited access to oncologists and treatment facilities in the local area. Others may elect to travel to consult with a specialist, seek a second opinion [1] on a diagnosis or proposed treatment plan, or undergo a therapy that isn't widely available, such as radioactive iodine therapy or proton beam therapy.

Planning for your trip

As you make travel arrangements, remember to consider the following issues:

Costs. Assess the potential costs associated with your travel (see below), and find out what costs your insurance will cover at the destination health care facility. Learn more about resources to help you find financial support [2].

Assistance. Consider asking a family member, friend, or other caregiver to accompany you on the trip if you think you will need physical or emotional support.

Lodging. Talk with your health care team to determine how long you will need to stay, and ask whether the hospital or treatment facility offers lodging options. You may also use travel websites or a travel agent to find lodging.

If lodging presents a financial burden, check with organizations that provide low-cost options for patients. Organizations like Joe's House [3] and the National Association of Hospital Hospitality Houses [4] help patients find housing, while organizations like Ronald McDonald House Charities [5] and hospital cancer centers directly provide housing options.

Transportation. Determine whether you will need to travel by car, airplane, or another mode of transportation. For air travel, inform your airline if you will require special accommodations, such as wheelchair assistance or meals that comply with dietary restrictions. In addition, check the U.S. Transportation Security Administration requirements [6] for carrying medications and other specialized medical equipment.

A number of resources are available for those who need financial assistance with transportation to receive treatment [2].

Work. Talk with your supervising manager about the procedure for taking time off from work, including your eligibility for short-term disability or other types of medical leave. Learn more about cancer and the workplace [7].

Medication. Refill prescriptions for any medications that may be running low to ensure that you have an adequate supply for your trip.

Arrangements at home. Think through the responsibilities you have at home that will require attention while you are away. You may need to find caregivers for your children, pets, or house.

Talking with your health care team before travel

Before finalizing travel plans, ask your home-based and destination doctors to help you understand:

The nature of your long-distance appointment. Your home-based doctor can help you set expectations for your appointment and recommend questions to ask [8] the health care team at your destination. If you are planning to undergo a treatment or procedure during your trip, consult with the doctor at your destination to find out how you should prepare for it, how long it will take, whether you will need to stay in the hospital, what short-term or long-term side effects [9] you may experience, and how soon you will be able to travel after the treatment or procedure.

Coordination of care. Ask your home-based and destination doctors how they will communicate and coordinate care before, during, and after your trip.

Travel restrictions and precautions. Depending on your condition, your travel options may be limited. For example, if you are traveling to undergo surgery, your doctor may recommend postponing a long-distance return flight due to an increased risk of thrombosis (the formation of a blood clot in a blood vessel) or other health complications. Learn more about restrictions and precautions for people traveling with cancer [10].

Preparing for your destination appointment

It is important to take an active role in ensuring that your health care team has all of the information necessary to provide you with the best care. In preparation for your appointment, compile the following information:

Medical history. Bring documentation of your medical history, including diagnostic and laboratory test results and a summary of any treatments that you have undergone. Ideally, the receiving health care facility will have some of this information in advance, but it is wise to carry your own records to ensure that your health care team has the full picture of your situation. Find a form to track your medical history [11].

Health care team contact information. Keep a list with contact information for all the members of your health care team, which may include your primary care doctor, oncologist, other doctors, nurses, social workers, and physical therapists. In addition, carry a similar list of all the people and facilities you are scheduled to visit at your destination. Use this form [12] to list your health care team members.

Medication information. Provide a comprehensive list of all of your medications, specifying the dosages and the times when you take them. Include both prescription and over-the-counter medications you take for medical conditions other than cancer. Use this form [11] to list your medications.

Coping while away from home

Time away from home from home can be difficult, particularly if the nature of your travel means that you will be gone for extended periods. However, there are a number of things that you can do to make your time away easier for yourself and your loved ones.

- If possible, travel with a family member or friend who can not only provide support during your trip but also share the responsibility of communicating with those back at home.
- Use technology. Software, such as Skype and other video-chat technologies, e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging allow you to stay in contact with friends and family, regardless of location and time zone. If you enjoy writing and have the time to do so, perhaps consider using a free blog to keep friends and family updated on your activities.
- Make an effort to personalize your space while on the road by packing itemsâ€"such as a cozy blanket, a plush bath robe, or framed photos of family and friendsâ€"that will help make your temporary lodging feel a bit more like home.

Returning home

Whether you traveled for treatment or a second opinion, it is always a good idea to set up some time to sit down with your home-based care team and provide an update. For ease of schedulingâ€"and for peace of mindâ€"schedule your appointment before your departure.

More information

Managing your Care [13]

Managing the Cost of Cancer Care [14]

Long-Distance Caregiving [15]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/25355
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25370
[3] http://www.joeshouse.org/
[4] http://www.nahhh.org/
[5] http://rmhc.org/
[6] http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/specialneeds/editorial_1374.shtm#4
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25298
[8] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/diagnosing-cancer/questions-ask-doctor
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25238
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24707
[11] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/vignette/my_history.pdf
[12] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/vignette/my_healthcare_team.pdf
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/25015
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[15] http://www.cancer.net/node/25234