Deciding to Participate in a Clinical Trial

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], November / 2013

Watch theCancer.Net Video: Cancer Clinical Trials as a Treatment Option, with Mary Lou Smith, JD[2], adapted from this content

Key Messages:

- The decision to participate in a clinical trial is complex and may depend on several factors.
- Before deciding on a clinical trial, talk with your doctor to learn more about the types of studies being done and about the possible risks and benefits.

Deciding to participate in a clinical trial is a complex decision. For some patients, a clinical trial may be the best treatment option available. Because standard treatments are not perfect, patients are often willing to face the added uncertainty of a clinical trial in the hope of a better result. Other patients volunteer for clinical trials because they know that these studies are an important way to make progress in treating cancer. Even if they do not benefit directly, their participation may benefit future patients with cancer.

More than two-thirds of children with cancer are treated as part of a clinical trial. Cancer in children is rare, so it can be hard for doctors to plan treatments unless they know what has been most effective for other children. Every time a doctor gives a new therapy that helps treat the cancer, it is a testament to the promise of clinical trials. To put the importance of clinical trials into perspective, it is helpful to recognize that virtually every treatment available today is the direct result of clinical research.

Learning about the process

Choosing to participate in a clinical trial may be easier if you learn more about your disease, condition, or health. The following steps may help you decide if you want participate in a clinical trial:

- Learn about the types of clinical trials that are being done and how they are designed.
- Talk with your doctor about which clinical trials might be right for you.
- Find out the risks and benefits of participating in the clinical trial.
- Learn what costs associated with the clinical trials you will be responsible for.
- Make sure to get answers to all of your questions from your doctor [3].

Talk about this information and how you feel about it with your doctor, nurse, family members, and friends to help you determine what is best for you. Sometimes, other patients who have been in a clinical trial also may be able to provide helpful insight.

Benefits and risks of clinical trials

The decision to join a clinical trial is similar to making decisions about other aspects of your treatment. There are both pros and cons associated with clinical trials. Some people decide that there are too many risks, while others decide that they are willing to take those risks to try a new treatment.

Here is how participating in a clinical trial can help you:

- You may gain access to new treatments that are not available to the public.
- You will get expert medical care at leading health care facilities during the clinical trial.
- You will be helping others by contributing to medical research.

Here are some of the potential risks:

- There may be side effects from medications or treatments.
- The treatment may not work.
- The clinical trial may require more of your time for trips to the study site, treatments, hospital stays, or complex dosage requirements than would be required for a standard treatment.
- The new treatment may not be available to you right away once the clinical trial is finished.

What might also help when making a decision is to read stories of people who have participated in clinical trials [4] and learn why they decided to participate.

More Information

Finding a Clinical Trial [5]

Patient Safety and Informed Consent [6]

Making Decisions About Cancer Treatment [7].

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/27066
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24881
[4] http://www.cancerprogress.net/stories
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24878
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24879
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24582