Choosing a Doctor for Your Cancer Care [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 09/2013

Listen to theCancer.Net Podcast: Choosing a Doctor for Your Cancer Care[3], adapted from this content.

Watch theCancer.Net Video: Choosing an Oncologist, with John Sweetenham, MD[4], adapted from this content

Key Messages

- After a cancer diagnosis, it is important find a doctor with whom you feel confident and comfortable to treat your cancer.
- To find a doctor specifically for your type of cancer, talk with your primary care doctor, family and friends, and your health insurance company, or search online.
- Ask questions of a prospective doctor to see if you will feel comfortable working together.

The doctor who diagnosed your cancer likely referred you to an oncologist?a doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer. The oncologist you choose will influence every aspect of your care, so it is important that you feel comfortable with this person?s expertise and approach to your care. He or she will work closely with you, your family, and support staff throughout treatment to provide you with the best care possible.

Where to find an oncologist

Oncologists practice in different settings, such as university hospitals, cancer centers, community hospitals, and local offices. To find an oncologist, talk with your primary care or family doctor, your health insurance company, or the local hospital. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) provides a free, searchable database of ASCO member oncologists [5] who wish to make their information public.

Other medical associations, such as the American Board of Medical Specialties [6], the American Medical Association [7], and the American College of Surgeons [8]also offer searchable databases of doctors. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services offers a searchable database of doctors who accept Medicare [9].

It may be wise to collect several names of prospective doctors because you may want a second or third opinion before you select an oncologist and begin treatment. Learn more about seeking a second opinion [10].

Tips for finding an oncologist

Here are some tips to help you find an oncologist:

- Look for a doctor who treats your specific type of cancer [11]. Depending on your treatment plan, you may need a medical, surgical, or radiation oncologist, or you may work with more than one type of oncologist. Learn more about types of oncologists [12].
- Find out whether the doctor participates in your health insurance plan. Many insurance plans allow their members to look up doctors by name or specialty. In addition, the doctor?s office staff can tell you which insurance plans they accept.
- Talk about your choice with family and friends, especially people who have received treatment for the same type of cancer. Ask which doctors they have seen and what their experiences were.
- Evaluate the doctor's credentials. Find out whether the doctor received advanced training, and confirm that he or she is board certified in oncology (meaning that the person has passed a high-level examination).
- Ask how long the doctor has been in practice and how many patients with your type of cancer the doctor treats each year. For rare types of cancer or specialized treatments, it may be especially important to find doctors who have related experience.
- Ask whether the doctor has access to clinical trials [13] (research studies involving people).
- Find out whether the office has support staff, which may include a registered nurse (RN), a social worker, a nutritionist, a pharmacist, and a counselor, and ask how they are involved in your care. Learn more about members of the oncology team [14].
- Find out how to reach the doctor during off hours, such as weekends and holidays.
- Ask whether treatments are given in the office or at a different location, and consider how often you?ll need to travel to receive treatment [15].
- Ask about special services for patients, such as reserved parking spaces or discounted parking.

If possible, you may want to arrange for a consultation to meet the doctor and the staff, either in the office or by phone. This may help you get a sense of your comfort level with the doctor, including whether the doctor talks with you in a way that you understand and answers your questions.

More Information

Choosing a Cancer Treatment Facility [16]

Finding a New Doctor [17]

Self-Advocacy: Participating in Your Cancer Care. [18]

Links:

[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/cancer-basics/cancer-care-team/choosing-doctor-your-cancer-care
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/choosing_a_doctor_for_your_cancer_care.mp3
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/27116
[5] http://www.cancer.net/all-about-cancer/newly-diagnosed/find-oncologist/find-oncologist-database
[6] http://www.abms.org/Who_We_Help/Consumers/
[7] https://extapps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/recaptcha.jsp
[8] http://web2.facs.org/acsdir/default_public.cfm
[9] http://www.medicare.gov/find-a-doctor/%28S%282ntfdw55plyexb55e1cncr45%29%29/provider-search.aspx?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25355
[11] http://www.cancer.net/cancer
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25356
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/24863
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/24957
[15] http://www.cancer.net/node/24706
[16] http://www.cancer.net/node/24527
[17] http://www.cancer.net/node/24525
[18] http://www.cancer.net/node/24669