

Questions to Ask the Doctor

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[1\]](#), October / 2011

Key Messages:

- Think about how much information you would like to know about your type of cancer, and share this information with your doctor.
- Use this list to generate ideas of questions you'd like to ask - €"you don't have to ask every question.
- Consider writing down your questions before the appointment.

Being informed and asking questions gives you some control over your cancer and may help you cope. Studies show that people with cancer who are fully informed about their disease and treatment options usually tend to fare better and have fewer side effects than those who simply follow doctors' orders. Some people feel overwhelmed by too much information, or do not want to know as many details about their condition. Think about how much information is right for you.

Getting answers to your questions

Your doctor should make time to answer your questions and explain the treatment options. Here are some tips to help you communicate better with your doctor:

- Tell your doctor if you are having trouble understanding an explanation, description, or unfamiliar medical words. Sometimes, the doctor may be able to draw a picture or give an example.
- Consider writing your questions down before your appointment, which can lower your level of stress and help make the most of your visit.
- Bring a notebook or a tape recorder to the appointment. During the appointment, write down your doctor's answers, or ask a family member or friend to write them down for you. This way, you can read or listen to the information later.
- If you are interested in seeking a [second opinion \[2\]](#), let your doctor know. Most doctors fully understand the value of a second opinion and are not offended when patients seek one. They may even be able to suggest another doctor.
- Ask your doctor or nurse where you can find additional information or printed materials about your condition. Many offices have this information readily available.
- Talk with your health care team about information you have found on the Internet or in books or magazines. Not all information is accurate and reliable. Learn more about [evaluating cancer information on the Internet \[3\]](#).

Suggested questions to ask the doctor

An important part of managing your care is knowing what questions to ask of your doctor. Every person's needs are unique, and your questions will change over time.

Here are some examples of the types of questions you may want to ask your doctor.

General information

- What type of cancer do I have?
- Where exactly is it located?
- What are the risk factors for this disease?
- Is this type of cancer caused by genetic factors? Are other members of my family at risk?
- How many people are diagnosed with this type of cancer each year?
- What lifestyle changes (diet, exercise, rest) do you recommend I make to stay as healthy as possible before, during, and after treatment?
- Where can I find more information about my cancer?

Symptoms

- What are some common symptoms or side effects of this type of cancer?
- How can I avoid these and/or manage them with my daily activities?
- Is there anything that can be done to make my symptoms or side effects better?
- Are there activities that may make them worse?
- If new symptoms or side effects arise or existing ones worsen, what should I do?

Diagnosis

- What diagnostic tests or procedures [4] are necessary? How often?
- What information will these tests tell us?
- How can I prepare myself for each test or procedure?
- Where do I need to go to have this test?
- When will I get the results? How will I get the results (over the phone, at the next appointment, etc.)?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- If I seek a second opinion, will I have to repeat any tests or procedures?
- How much information about my diagnosis should I share, and at what time, with my friends and loved ones?

Staging

- What is the stage of my cancer? What does this mean?
- Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- How is staging used to find out cancer treatment?
- What is my prognosis (chance of recovery)?

Treatment

- What are my treatment options?
- Which treatments, or combination of treatments, do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of the treatment you are recommending?
- What clinical trials (research studies involving people) are open to me?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How much experience do you (or the treatment team) have treating this type of cancer?
- Will I need to be hospitalized for treatment, or is this treatment done in an outpatient clinic?
- What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan? Do I need to be treated right away?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- What are the short-term side effects of this treatment?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with this cancer treatment?
- Will this treatment affect my fertility (ability to become pregnant or father children)?
- Besides treating cancer, what can be done to treat my symptoms?
- How can I keep myself as healthy as possible during treatment?

Clinical trials

- What are clinical trials?
- How do clinical trials help people with cancer?
- Is this a treatment option for me?
- What happens during a clinical trial?
- What are the benefits and risks of participating in a clinical trial?
- How will I be monitored while participating in a clinical trial?
- What are my responsibilities during the clinical trial?
- Are there any costs associated with my participation in a clinical trial?
- Where can I learn more about clinical trials?

Find more questions to ask the research team [5] when considering a clinical trial.

Support

- What support services are available to me? To my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or concerns during non-business hours?
- May I contact you or the nurse to talk about additional information I find?
- Can you recommend a social worker to help locate support services?
- Where can I find resources for children? For teenagers? For young adults? For older adults?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Who handles health insurance concerns in your office?

Follow-up care

- What follow-up tests do I need, and how often will I need them?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

For more questions, see the "Questions to Ask the Doctor" section of each cancer type [6].

More Information

All About Cancer [7]

Managing Your Care [8]

Self-Advocacy: Participating in Your Cancer Care [9]

Keeping a Personal Medical Record [10]

Links:

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25355>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24514>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24959>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24881>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/11>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25015>
- [9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24669>
- [10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24569>