

Sharing Responsibilities [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 11/2012

Key Messages:

- It is important to have open communication and set clear expectations when sharing caregiving responsibilities.
- Allow family members to help in the ways that they are able, depending on their individual abilities, lifestyles, and schedules.
- Consider seeking outside help from friends, relatives, and volunteer organizations.

Caring for a person with cancer often brings families together, with members providing mutual support to one another. However, the pressures of caregiving may also bring back old family conflicts or create new ones, making it difficult for family members to work together.

Families that are best able to appropriately express their feelings and work together will likely be better able to resolve conflicts about caregiving issues. On the other hand, families in which members solve problems independently and have trouble reaching an agreement might have more difficulty coping. It is important for families to recognize and discuss how they react to stressful situations.

Potential conflicts

Potential sources of conflict among caregiving families include:

Unequal division of caregiving duties. Typically, one family member takes on the primary (lead) role of caring for the person who has cancer and manages the majority of the caregiving responsibilities alone. This situation can make the caregiver feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and resentful, and other family members may feel left out.

Disagreement on caregiving decisions. There may be differences of opinion about financial, medical, and daily caregiving decisions.

Differences in coping styles. Family members may react differently to their caregiving responsibilities and have different ways of coping with their emotions.

Falling into old family roles. The relationship between family members may, at times, switch

back to when each member was younger. For example, siblings may find that they begin to deal with conflicts similarly to the way they did when younger. Or, one family member may take on more tasks than one person can handle and feel resentful toward other family members.

Working together as caregivers

Although resolving family conflicts can be challenging and uncomfortable, it is important to address issues quickly so that they do not affect the family's ability to provide high-quality care to the person with cancer. Each family member may want to reflect on whether it is more important to be right about a conflict or to get things done for the person with caregiver and support the other caregivers in the family.

The following suggestions can help families work together to become a supportive network.

- Expect and accept family members' differences of opinion and coping styles.
- Involve the person with cancer, if possible. He or she should always be a central part of all care-related discussions and actions.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help with caregiving responsibilities, and learn how to graciously accept it.
- Express appreciation to family members who are trying to help, even if the help is not exactly what is needed.
- Be realistic in dividing up caregiving responsibilities. Allow family members to help in the ways that they are able, and assign tasks according to individual abilities, lifestyles, and schedules.
- Caregiving responsibilities will vary day to day and week to week. Encourage family members to remain flexible and pitch in when extra help is needed.
- Get outside help from friends, relatives, and volunteer organizations.
- Ensure that all family members involved in caregiving are taking care of themselves physically and emotionally [3].
- Use online tools [4] that allow you to schedule tasks and communicate information. That way, all family members and other caregivers can get the latest information by connecting to the Internet.

Family meetings

It may be helpful to hold regularly scheduled family meetings. This is a time to encourage everyone on the caregiving team, including friends and relatives, and to discuss issues and concerns. Those who cannot attend in person may want to participate by phone. All participants should have an opportunity express their opinions and be heard.

Counseling

Some families may need professional help, such as counseling [5], to resolve their differences. In counseling, family members talk about their problems and receive guidance and advice from a trained mental health professional. A counselor can help families find solutions to specific, immediate problems.

By working together, a family can provide effective care with the least possible amount of conflict.

More Information

[Family Life](#) [6]

[Relationships and Cancer](#) [7]

[When You and Your Family Differ on Treatment Choices](#) [8]

[Caregiving](#) [9]

Additional resources

[CancerCare: Caregiver Support Services](#) [10]

[Family Caregiver Alliance: Holding a Family Meeting](#) [11]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/caregiver-support/sharing-responsibilities>

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25031>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25299>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25112>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24740>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25009>

[10] http://www.cancercare.org/get_help/special_progs/caregivers.php

[11] http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=475