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About Cancer Treatment [1]

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After receiving a cancer diagnosis, you may wonder where to start and what to expect from cancer treatment. Choosing a doctor is the first step; he or she will help you explore your treatment options and help you understand the side effects associated with specific types of treatment.

Choosing a doctor

Cancer among young adults is rare, and those who experience it face unique emotional, social, and treatment-related challenges [3]. For that reason, it is important to find an oncologist (a doctor who specializes in treating cancer) who has experience treating young adults with the type of cancer that was diagnosed.

To find an oncologist, talk with your primary care or family doctor, your health insurance company, or the local hospital. Many comprehensive cancer centers [4] offer specialized support for young adults with cancer.

If you are diagnosed with a type of cancer that typically occurs in children and adolescents?such as some types of brain tumors, leukemia, osteosarcoma, and Ewing's sarcoma?contact a pediatric oncologist, a doctor who specializes in treating children and adolescents with cancer. Young adults with those types of cancer may benefit more from treatments designed for children than from treatments designed for adults. For cancers that are more common in adults?such as breast cancer, colon cancer, and melanoma?contact a medical oncologist. If you are unsure about which type of oncologist you need, talk with your primary care doctor or a nurse.

Learn more about finding an oncologist [5] and finding a treatment facility [6].

Types of treatment

Cancer is treated in different ways, depending on the type and stage of the cancer, possible side effects, and the patient?s age, overall health, and preferences. Often, cancer treatment involves a combination of treatments. Some common types of treatment include the following:

- Surgery [7] (the removal of the tumor and surrounding tissue during an operation)?

- Chemotherapy [8] (the use of drugs to kill cancer cells, usually by stopping the cancer cells? ability to grow and divide) ?
- Radiation therapy [9] (the use of high-energy x-rays or other particles to kill cancer cells)?
- Immunotherapy [10], also called biologic therapy (the use of materials made either by the body or in a laboratory to bolster, target, or restore immune system function, boosting the body's natural defenses to fight the cancer)
- Targeted therapy [11] (the use of drugs that target the cancer?s specific genes, proteins, or the tissue environment that contributes to cancer growth and survival, limiting damage to normal cells)
- Hormone therapy (the use of drugs that add, remove, or interfere with hormones, such as estrogen or testosterone, which are produced by glands in the body)?
- Stem cell/bone marrow transplantation [12] (a medical procedure in which diseased marrow?a spongy, fatty tissue found inside larger bones?is destroyed and replaced with healthy bone marrow from the patient or from a volunteer donor)

Some treatments are offered through clinical trials (research studies involving people to evaluate whether a new treatment is safe, effective, and possibly better than standard treatment). These types of studies evaluate new drugs, different combinations of existing treatments, new approaches to radiation therapy or surgery, and new methods of treatment. Learn more about clinical trials for young adults [13].

Find treatment information specific to your type of cancer [14], and learn more about making treatment decisions [15].

Side effects

Some cancer treatments cause side effects, but preventing and controlling side effects is a major focus of your health care team. This is called palliative or supportive care, and it is an important part of the overall treatment plan, regardless of the stage of disease.

Before treatment begins, talk with your doctor about possible side effects of each type of treatment you will be receiving. Ask which side effects are most likely to happen, when they are likely to occur, and what can be done to prevent or relieve them.

Side effects depend on a variety of factors, including the cancer?s stage, the length and dosage of treatment, and your overall health. Common physical side effects of cancer treatment include the following:

- Fatigue [16] (a persistent sense of tiredness or exhaustion)
- Pain [17]
- Nausea [18] (feeling the urge to throw up) and vomiting [18] (throwing up)
- Hair loss [19]
- Mucositis [20] (inflammation inside the mouth and throat that can lead to painful ulcers and mouth sores)
- Fever, which may a sign of infection [21] or neutropenia [22] (an abnormally low level of neutrophils, a type of white blood cell)
- Diarrhea [23] (frequent, loose, or watery bowel movements)
- Constipation [24] (infrequent or difficult bowel movements)

In addition to physical side effects, you may experience psychosocial (emotional and social) effects, including fear of physical side effects [25]. Share your feelings with a member of your health care team who can help you find coping strategies [26].

During and after treatment, tell the health care team about the side effects you experience, even if you feel they are not serious. Sometimes, side effects last beyond the treatment period. These are called long-term side effects. A side effect that occurs months or years after treatment is called a late effect [27]. Treatment of both types of effects is an important part of survivorship care.

Learn more about managing side effects [28].

More Information

Moving Forward Videos: Managing Pain [29] for Young Adults with Cancer

Moving Forward Videos: Fear of Recurrence [30] for Young Adults with Cancer

Cancer in Young Adults [31]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/young-adults/treatment-information/about-cancer-treatment
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24400
[4] http://www.cancer.net/publications-and-resources/support-and-resource-links/general-cancer-organizations-and-resources/cancer-centers-coop-groups
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24932
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24527
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[30] http://www.cancer.net/multimedia/videos/young-adults-cancer/fear-recurrence
[31] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117