Questions to Ask the Doctor

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], November / 2012

Key Messages

- Think about and tell your doctor how much information you would like to know about your diagnosis and treatment plan.
- Use the list below to get ideas as you write your own list of questions you?d like to ask.
- Consider contacting your doctor?s office before your appointment to see whether a nurse may be able to answer some of your questions in advance so that you can make the most of your time with the doctor.

There is a lot for you to learn once you've been diagnosed with cancer. It?s ok to ask your doctor, nurses, and other members of the health care team to explain anything about your diagnosis and treatment plan that you do not understand and to ask as many questions as you need to. In fact, the people who care for you want to know what concerns you and which topics are sources of confusion. In addition to learning the necessary information, asking questions gives you more control, which helps you better cope with cancer and its treatment.

With all of the new information you are receiving, it may be easy to forget the questions you want to ask when you are with the doctor. The sample questions below may help you think through topics you would like to address during your appointment. You may find that writing questions in advance helps you organize your thinking. Also consider bringing another person with you to your appointment who can help you write down the information your doctor provides in response. Or, download the Cancer.Net mobile app [2], which has a section for you to select specific questions (or write your own) and record the answers.

However, in a busy office or clinic, it may be difficult to have all of your questions answered during one visit. Consider contacting the office with questions before your appointment. A nurse may be able to answer your questions or alert the doctor of your concerns. In some cases, you may have the option to email your doctor or nurse.

General questions

- What type of cancer do I have?
- Where is it located?
- Where can I find more information about this cancer?
- What lifestyle changes (such as diet, exercise, and rest) do you recommend I make to stay as healthy as possible before, during, and after treatment?

Symptoms

- What are some common signs or symptoms of this type of cancer?
- How can I manage them?
- Are there activities I should avoid that may make me feel worse?
- Will my symptoms go away with treatment?

Diagnosis

- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- Will I need other tests or procedures? When and how often will I need them?
- What will these tests tell me about the cancer?
- Will any tests or procedures hurt or be uncomfortable? What can you do to help me to remain comfortable and calm?

Staging

- What is the stage of my cancer? What does this mean?
- Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or to any other parts of my body?
- How is staging used to determine the best cancer treatment plan?
- What is my prognosis (chance of recovery)?

Treatment

- What treatment options do I have? Which treatment do you recommend and why?

- Are any clinical trials [3] open to me? Where can I get more information about clinical trials?
- What are the possible side effects [4] of each treatment option, both in the short term and long term? How do you recommend managing these side effects?
- How long will my treatment last?
- Where will I receive treatment?
- Will I be admitted to the hospital? If so, how long will I need to stay there?
- Who will be part of my health care team, and what does each member do?
- Who will coordinate my overall treatment and follow-up care?
- Will I need to take time off from school or work?
- Will I be able to be physically active during treatment? How else will treatment affect my life and activities?
- How will I feel after treatment? How long will I feel this way?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to father a child or become pregnant later on?
- If so, what steps can I take to preserve my ability to have a family after cancer treatment?
- How will this treatment affect me later in my adult life? What are the long-term side effects of this treatment?

After treatment

- When can I go back to school or work and return to my regular activities?
- What should I tell my friends, coworkers, and employer about my cancer?
- What happens once treatment is over? Will I need more checkups, and how often will I need them?
- What are signs that the cancer may be recurring (coming back)?
- Whom should I call with questions?

Support and coping

- How can I connect with other people my age who have this type of cancer?
- How will cancer affect my spouse or partner, family, friends, and other relationships?
- What support services are available to me? To my family?
- 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?
- Where should I turn if I have additional questions about coping with cancer?

More Information

Cancer in Young Adults [5] [6]

Talking With the Doctors and Nurses [7]

Self-Advocacy: Participating in Your Cancer Care [8]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25555
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24863
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25238
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Age-Specific+Information/Cancer+in+Young+Adults/Being+a+Young+Adult+With+Cancer/Talking+With+the+Doctors+and+Nurses
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25184
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24669