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When the Doctor Says Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 10/2012

Listen to theCancer.Net Podcast: When the Doctor Says Cancer[3], adapted from this content.

Watch theCancer.Net Video: When the Doctor Says Cancer, with Maurie Markman, MD[4] , adapted from this content.

Key Messages

- After a cancer diagnosis, it is important to take care of yourself as you begin to cope with this news.
- Start learning about your disease by asking your health care team questions and reading information from trustworthy sources.
- Find a doctor who specializes in treating your type of cancer.
- Seek the support of others, and find outlets to express your feelings.

It is a situation people often fear?sitting in the doctor's office and hearing the word cancer. People diagnosed with cancer often say they were stunned when they heard the news and unable to process much that was said afterward. After the initial shock, consider the following steps to learn about your diagnosis, find treatment, and cope.

Learn about your diagnosis

Cancer is a group of more than 100 diseases, so it is important to understand your specific type of cancer or cancer-related syndrome [5], including the process of diagnosing and treating it. This enables you to take an active role in your cancer care by asking appropriate questions, accessing resources, and making informed treatment decisions.

During your initial doctor?s visit, you may struggle to process the amount of information you receive, and unfamiliar medical language may confuse you. Ask your doctor to explain any medical terms [6] you don?t understand. And don?t be afraid to ask questions [7].

Also consider bringing a family member or a friend to your appointments to help listen and take notes. Or use a recorder during the visit, which allows you to capture information that you can replay in the future.

Some patients desire more information, while others prefer less. For example, some want to avoid hearing statistics about chances of survival. Tell your doctor and other members of your health care team your preferences for receiving information about your diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis (chance of recovery).

Meanwhile, the Internet is a useful tool for finding information about cancer. However, because Internet content is not regulated, you need to use good judgment when searching online. Find questions to ask when viewing cancer information websites [8].

Find medical care

After receiving a cancer diagnosis, it is important find an oncologist?a doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer. Ask your primary care doctor, family members, and friends for referrals. Or search online [9] to find an oncologist in your area.

Also consider getting a second opinion [10]. This involves visiting another doctor to gather more information about your diagnosis and the available treatment options, which increases your confidence in making decisions about your cancer care. A second opinion is a standard practice in medical care. In fact, many doctors encourage their patients to seek a second opinion.

Meanwhile, ask your doctor what clinical trials [11] are available as treatment options for your type of cancer. A clinical trial is a research study to test a new treatment to evaluate whether it is safe, effective, and possibly better than standard treatment.

Get organized

As you gather information, make appointments, receive test results, collect records, and track insurance coverage and finances, you will need a system to manage it all. Organization helps you gain control over your schedule and information, allowing you to receive the most value from the time spent with your health care providers and make well-informed decisions.

If you have a smartphone or tablet, you may want to download Cancer.Net?s free mobile app [12] to help you stay organized. It provides portable cancer information, tracks side effects, saves prescription information, and records answers to a personalized list of questions.

Find support to cope with challenges

It is important to remember that you are not alone as you cope with your cancer diagnosis and treatment [13]. Find support from family, friends, and community resources to manage emotional, practical, and financial issues.

Emotional support. You may experience complex emotions while processing the news of a cancer diagnosis and undergoing treatment. In addition to communicating with your doctor, talk about your concerns with family members and friends. You may consider joining a support group [14]

, which allows you to share your experience and learn from others who are facing similar situations.

Counselors [15] are another source of support to process difficult emotions. Discouragement and fear are not uncommon in people diagnosed with cancer. However, if you aren?t participating in your normal activities or are having difficulty concentrating, sleeping, or eating, tell your doctor and ask about counseling options.

Other outlets to express your emotions and relieve stress include writing in a journal [16]; doing creative projects, such as painting; praying; reading; and meditating.

Practical support. As you experience challenges associated with cancer and cancer treatment, you may wonder how you can manage your normal responsibilities, including work [17] and parenting [18]. This is the time to accept help from others, take advantage of available conveniences, and reevaluate your priorities.

Financial support. The cost of cancer care can be high, and these costs may be a burden for some people. It is important to talk openly with your health care team about the costs of your care soon after diagnosis. Understanding what costs to expect before starting treatment can help you manage the financial impact of cancer in the most effective way possible. Learn more about managing the cost of cancer care [19], including financial resources [20].

Put your diagnosis in perspective

Although cancer is a serious disease, you have reasons to be hopeful. In the past several decades, major milestones have been reached in the care and treatment of people with cancer, including advances in treatment and supportive care for side effects.

More Information

Managing Your Care [21]

Additional Resources

Cancer*Care*: Coping With Cancer: Tools to Help You Live [22]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/diagnosing-cancer/when-doctor-says-cancer
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/When_the_Doctor_Says_Cancer.mp3
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/27121
[5] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/28241
[7] http://www.cancer.net/all-about-cancer/newly-diagnosed/questions-ask-doctor
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