

Talking With Your Doctor



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Introduction

Cancer treatment often means that you will have more than one doctor. You may even have a cancer care team. Although you may get information from several sources, it's a good idea to choose one doctor to be your main source. This will be the doctor you turn to with your concerns. This doctor may or may not be the one you see most often. Only you can choose which doctor will be your main source of information. We offer the following to help you make the choice that's right for you.

A good relationship between you and your doctor is an important part of good health care. You must be able to communicate well with each other so that your needs are met.

You should feel at ease with your doctor. A good relationship with your doctor is worth the effort it takes to create it. This means taking the time to ask your questions and make your concerns known. Likewise, your doctor must take the time to answer your questions and listen to your concerns. If you and your doctor feel the same way about sharing information and making choices, you are likely to have a good relationship.

What is the first step toward creating good communication with your doctor?

Ask Yourself, “How Much Do I Want to Know?”

You may want to know a lot of medical details about your illness. Some people feel more in control of what is happening to them when they know all of the facts. Decide whether or not knowing many details about your diagnosis and treatment would be helpful for you. If it would, let your doctor know.

Or you may want only the overview. It disturbs some people to be told too many details. They may want simple directions – what pill to take or what their treatment will be and when it will be done. They feel overwhelmed by medical details and would rather leave most decisions to the doctor. Don't be afraid to tell your doctor how much or how little information you want.

Sharing Information

Everyone has a different style of communication. That's why the perfect doctor for one person may not be a good match for another. Consider what you value in a doctor. Some people feel more comfortable with a physician who will share information in a clinical and business-like manner. They expect their doctor to be the medical expert rather than a friend. Other people want their doctors to have an excellent “bedside manner.” They value a physician who can attend to their emotional health as well as their medical needs. Many people whose illnesses require long-term treatment prefer this kind of friendly relationship with their physician. After you have thought through what you want as a patient, the next step is to look at how you communicate with the doctor you have chosen.

Remembering What Your Doctor Says

It's hard to listen well and understand complex information when you are anxious or afraid. Even if the doctor is very thorough, you may not hear or remember what is being said. There are several ways you can make sure that you remember everything your doctor tells you accurately. Decide which way will be best for you.

After you have thought through what you want as a patient, the next step is to look at how you communicate with the doctor you have chosen.

- Take notes to help you recall what your doctor says.
- Ask if you can tape record your talk for later review.
- Have a family member or friend there with you. They can remind you of questions you want to ask and help you remember later what the doctor said. It may also be easier to have this person keep your family informed of your medical status. This will help your family feel included without burdening you with many questions. You may want their help in making decisions, so keeping them up-to-date may be in your best interest.

Sometimes, without realizing it, doctors use terms their patients don't understand. If you don't understand something, ask your doctor to explain it to you.

Asking Questions

Here are some questions your doctor can usually answer for you:

- What's wrong with me?
- What treatment do you recommend?
- Are there other treatments?
- What are the benefits of these treatments?
- What are the risks?
- What medicines are you giving me? What are they for?
- How should I expect to feel during treatment?
- What side effects, if any, can I expect to have?

Above all, your doctor should take your questions seriously. He should be interested in your concerns and not make you feel rushed.

When you get instructions from your doctor, write them down in detail. Make sure you understand them before you leave the office. Then follow them exactly. You may also want to keep written notes on your day-to-day health questions and concerns. Bring them with you to appointments to help you remember what you wanted to tell your doctor.

Here are other issues you may want to discuss with your doctor:

- Who else gets information about me? Should anyone else – a spouse, a friend, or another doctor – also get information? Think about your options and tell your doctor what you want.
- What issues are important to me? For example, will the disease or the treatment keep me from working or caring for my family? Will I have any physical limitations? Again, ask your doctor if you want more information about your treatment. Ask if there is written information you can take away with you.
- If you have persistent low or hopeless feelings, mention this to your doctor. You may have clinical depression, a diagnosable and treatable illness that can occur along with cancer.
- What is the best time to call if I have a question? Some doctors usually have a special time to return calls. Expect your doctor to call you back, but remember that a quick response may not be possible if another patient is having a crisis.

Above all, your doctor should take your questions seriously. He or she should be interested in your concerns and not make you feel rushed. If your doctor does not respond this way, bring it up at your next visit. Though it may be difficult to do so, the relationship may suffer if these concerns remain unspoken.

The Doctor-Patient Relationship

A good doctor-patient relationship is a two-way street. Here are some ways that you can help maintain your end of the relationship:

- Try to state as clearly as you can any changes in body functions, from sleep and bowel habits to other changes such as

headaches. Make notes so you can report these accurately and thoroughly to your doctor.

- Talk over your concerns about the impact of cancer on your lifestyle. Be honest about your lifestyle habits, even if it's something you're not proud of, such as smoking. Never hold back information. Something you think is minor could affect your treatment. Or, something you think is serious might be easily relieved.
- Make a list of all your questions. Take it with you to your doctor visits. Don't be ashamed or shy about asking these questions. There is no such thing as a "dumb" question. Refer to the questions listed in this booklet for some ideas and then add your own.

If You Have a Problem Talking With Your Doctor

If you have a problem talking with your doctor, there are often ways to improve the situation. Try working out your concerns before deciding if the situation is hopeless.

First of all, state your concern as honestly and openly as possible. Here are some opening statements you may want to consider:

- "I'm concerned that we aren't communicating well, and here's why..."
- "I need to be able to talk with you about _____, and I feel like I can't. Can we discuss this?"
- "I realize that you're very busy, but I need very much to discuss _____ at more length. Can we schedule a time to do that?"
- "I'm having trouble understanding _____. Can you help me?"

If you need more details after your doctor answers a question, say so. Sometimes it's even helpful to ask the question again in a different way. Unless you tell your doctors that you don't understand something, they will usually assume that you do. There's nothing wrong with not understanding the first explanation; just ask for another. If you want to learn more about your cancer treatment, ask your doctor to suggest some reading materials. If you feel comfortable doing so, learning more about your treatment can also help you become more actively involved in it.

If you are unable to work out the problem during your regular visits with your doctor, ask for a special visit to discuss it. If the issue directly concerns your cancer treatment, go to the meeting with as much knowledge as possible. You can call us at 1-800-ACS-2345 for more information about cancer. Always tell your doctor where you get your information and then ask for his or her opinion.

Even if you feel frustrated or angry, try to avoid being hostile or accusatory toward your doctor. Much of the time, people will become defensive and withdraw if they feel attacked – a response that will be unhelpful in the long run. State your concerns and questions clearly and honestly, without making accusations.

What should you do if you feel you have done your part but the situation has not improved? You might consider talking with a third party about the problem. The head nurse or your family doctor might be willing to discuss the matter with the doctor. Sometimes this is less stressful than facing the doctor directly, and their help could improve the situation.

If not, it may be time to find a new doctor. Don't stay with a doctor only to protect his or her feelings. Just because you

were referred to the doctor does not mean you can't decide to change on your own. It's your body, and you have the right to find the best doctor for you.

Changes in the Doctor-Patient Relationship

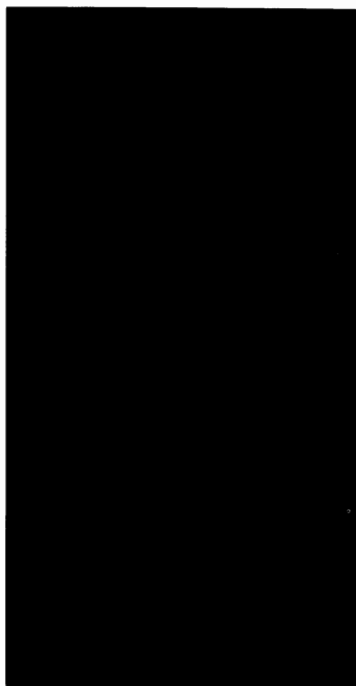
If you are in the hospital, your relationship with your doctor will change somewhat. Many other people will be involved in your care during your stay at the hospital, so your doctor will not necessarily be the only one making treatment decisions.

Hospitals also have rules and policies, and your doctor has to follow these, too. Sometimes hospital policies and routines can clash with your own, and you will need to negotiate ways to be more comfortable there. In the hospital, you will also be surrounded by activity, which can be stressful in itself. Keep in mind that your doctor may be able to help you solve problems that might come up as you adjust to hospital routines, rules, and practices.

If you have a problem with your doctor while you are in the hospital, there are other people there who may be able to help. Speak to someone like a nurse or a social worker. Or ask if the hospital has a patient service representative on staff. They can provide support and help you organize your thoughts before talking with your doctor. With your permission, they might even speak directly with your doctor.

People who have cancer are likely to want to build a good relationship with their doctors. Over the long term, it is helpful to identify one doctor to be your main source of information. Ask this physician if he or she is comfortable with that. Building this relationship doesn't just happen – it takes care and effort on both sides. Chances are, you'll both benefit from it.

The American Cancer Society is the nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer, through research, education, advocacy, and service. No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support.



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