

Newly Diagnosed

How do I cope?

A new diagnosis of cancer can be a shock, making you feel out of control and overwhelmed. One of the best ways to gain control is with information. So take a deep breath, spend some time learning about your diagnosis and treatment options, ask questions, and get a second opinion. It is a rare cancer that requires immediate action.

What is cancer?

Cancer is not one disease, but many diseases that occur in different areas of the body. Each type of cancer is characterized by the uncontrolled growth of cells. Under normal conditions, the body carefully controls cell reproduction, destroying any malformed cells. However, these controls can malfunction, resulting in abnormal cell growth and the development of a lump, mass, or tumor. Some cancers involving the blood and blood-forming organs do not form tumors, but circulate through other tissues where they grow.

How serious is my cancer?

A tumor may be benign (noncancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Only cells from cancerous tumors spread throughout the body. This process, called metastasis, occurs when cancer cells break away from the original tumor and travel in the circulatory or lymphatic systems until they get stuck in a small blood vessel in another area of the body. Metastasis typically occurs in the bones, lungs, liver, and central nervous system.

How did I get cancer?

Unfortunately, we usually don't know the answer to this question. Although there are certain known carcinogens, or materials that can cause cancer, such as cigarettes and asbestos, many are still undiscovered. We also don't know why some people exposed to carcinogens get cancer and others don't.

Genetics can also play an important role in cancer development. For instance, certain types of breast cancer have a genetic component.

What's next?

As you move beyond the initial shock of your diagnosis and begin the journey of surviving your cancer, remain optimistic. Today's treatments are easier to tolerate, with fewer side effects. Treatments are also more effective, particularly since more cancers are found in earlier stages.

While no one would call cancer a "normal" experience, proactively managing aspects of your treatment can help you maintain a sense of normalcy. Also remember that you're not alone. Fighting cancer requires a team effort involving family, friends, and your health care team. Don't overlook the strength that comes from this support.

Words to Know

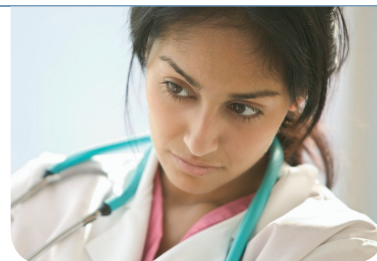
Benign: A noncancerous tumor.

Carcinogens: Substances such as cigarettes that can cause cellular changes leading to cancer.

Lymphatic system: The interconnected system of spaces and vessels between body tissues and organs through which lymph, a thin fluid containing white blood cells and other substances, gets to the bloodstream.

Malignant: A cancerous tumor capable of spreading throughout the body.

Metastasis: When cells from an original cancer or tumor break away and begin growing in another part of the body.



Tips for Cancer Patients

A diagnosis of cancer can be a shock, making you feel out of control and overwhelmed. One of the best ways to gain control is with information. So spend some time learning about your diagnosis and treatment options, ask questions, and get a second opinion. It is a rare cancer that requires immediate action.

Follow the tips below. They come from health professionals and cancer patients.

After the Diagnosis

Get the facts. Talk to your health care professionals. Ask them for a supply of reliable resources. Learn everything you can, including the results you can expect from treatment and your medical team's role.

Ask questions. You have the right to have your questions answered. Here are some you may want to ask your doctor:

1. What exactly is my diagnosis? (Get a copy for your records.)
2. What is the prognosis (outlook) for my cancer? Is the intent of treatment curative, to achieve remission that will likely be followed by recurrence, or to control the signs and symptoms of cancer as well as possible for as long a time as possible?
3. What are my treatment options? What treatment plan do you recommend?
4. What scientific studies are there to support the treatment plan you recommend?
5. Are there any differences of opinion among medical experts about the treatment plan you are recommending? If so, can you explain what they are?
6. Are there clinical trials that I'm eligible for? Where are those clinical trials being conducted?
7. Where would you recommend I get a second opinion?

Learn the terminology. A good source for defining cancer terms is www.Caring4Cancer.com. Use the Health Lookup A-Z and the many other resources located there.

Slow down. Most cancers take years to develop. Thus you have time to consider your treatment plan. Follow a multistep approach, beginning with exploring treatment options and obtaining a second opinion to help you make decisions with confidence.

During Treatment

Understand the results. Not every treatment is a cure. Treatment can range from curative to noncurative. For example, treatment for most early stage cancers is usually curative, while later-stage diseases may have treatment that is noncurative, but aimed at prolonging your cancer-free survival time or alleviating symptoms to improve your quality of life. Noncurative treatment options may include experimental therapies.

Define your role. You are responsible for finding information and appropriate treatment. Asking the right questions and finding the right health care professionals for your medical team so you receive optimum care and appropriate treatment is your responsibility.

Define your medical team's role. Today, most cancers are treated with a multidisciplinary approach involving a surgeon, oncologist, radiation oncologist, and possibly other health care professionals. Use the doctors on your medical team as guides to your disease, but don't rely on their information alone when making treatment decisions. Remember, you are a full partner in your care. The journey through cancer involves care of the mind, body, and spirit.