

# OLDER ADULTS COPING WITH CANCER

The single greatest risk factor for cancer is aging. Older adults (people age 65 or older) with a diagnosis have unique needs when coping with cancer.

## IT'S IMPORTANT FOR OLDER ADULTS AND THEIR LOVED ONES TO KEEP IN MIND THE FOLLOWING

**Manage your care.** A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, but there are some tools to make managing your care a little easier:

- Take notes at appointments or ask to record the discussion
- Prepare questions before appointments
- Review the information after the appointment and write down any questions you may have
- Keep a calendar to record appointments
- Use a notebook to keep track of symptoms and side effects
- Create a file for all paperwork related to the diagnosis, including copies of important records
- Compile a current list of all medications and phone numbers/addresses of your healthcare providers

**Support from family and friends can play an important part in the care of an older adult.** Aging brings many changes that can include loss of independence due to physical and social changes. While coping with a cancer diagnosis, family and friends can help older adults with the following:

- Check in with your loved one. Ask: "What do you need?"
- Review any medical concerns your loved one may have
- Provide transportation to and from treatment and doctor appointments



- Assist with meals, shopping or other personal care tasks when needed
- Be a supportive listener. Listening without judgment is a tremendous gift to your loved one.
- Don't forget to care for yourself!

**It's important that health problems unrelated to cancer are addressed.** Chronic health problems unrelated to cancer, such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease or arthritis, need to be considered during cancer treatment. For an older adult, it is important that the treatment plan and health care team take into account the individual's overall health status, including:

- Any medications being taken and their possible interaction with cancer treatments
- Mobility, balance and memory limitations
- Nutritional needs or restrictions
- Financial concerns
- Potential barriers, including who will be there to help with daily concerns like grocery shopping, cooking and providing transportation to medical appointments

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**Ask questions to fully understand the diagnosis and the goal of treatment.** Understanding a cancer diagnosis and treatment plans directly impacts health outcomes. Questions can include:

- Will this treatment plan affect my ability to live on my own?
- How could treatment affect other co-existing health issues?
- How will treatment affect my memory?
- Is the goal longer survival, which may mean a more intensive treatment, or is it quality of life?
- What materials can I take with me to better understand my diagnosis and treatment plan?

For someone living with cancer, the health care team is one of the most important aspects of their care, and as a health consumer the individual has every right to receive quality care. It is essential that older adults and their loved ones be able to openly and honestly discuss their care with their doctors and any potential difficulties that may arise. For more information on questions to ask your doctor, see our “Doctor, Can We Talk? Tips for Communicating With Your Health Care Team” fact sheet.

### **AN ONCOLOGY SOCIAL WORKER CAN HELP**

Having cancer as an older adult affects the individual and their loved ones. An oncology social worker can help you navigate this process. CancerCare’s professional oncology social workers help anyone affected by cancer, free of charge. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).



### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master’s-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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