



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

# THE VALUE OF ASSERTIVENESS WHEN TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR

“Assertiveness” is the ability to express your wishes, questions and needs in a clear and direct way so that other people, like your health care team, are able to understand what it is you want and need. Being assertive will help improve the quality of the care you receive.

## WAYS TO BE ASSERTIVE WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

**Use “I” statements when speaking with your doctor.** For example: “I know you want to help me, and I need to ask some questions because I feel scared and worried.”

**Avoid attacking or blaming the health care professional by starting sentences with the word “you.”** Avoid statements like these: “You never answer my questions.” “You always rush me.” “Why did you do this?” Instead, say: “How will the medicine or treatment help me?” or “I feel disrespected when I cannot get my questions answered.”

**Ask for a translator if you are more comfortable communicating in a different language than your doctor.** Hospitals have free interpretation services available or can arrange for an interpreter with advance notice. If you cannot communicate with your doctor in your preferred language directly, working with a certified interpreter ensures that you understand your diagnosis, treatment options and other issues. It also helps the doctor clearly understand your symptoms, questions and concerns. Let the treatment team know about this before the appointment.

**Let the doctor know if you feel rushed, confused, intimidated or dissatisfied.** The only way a doctor can help you is if they know what you are thinking—doctors are not mind-readers.



**If the doctor says, “Do not worry,” ask them to explain your situation with more information.** For example, you may want to ask clarifying questions such as, “Does that mean my health is improving?”

**Let the doctor know if you need them to speak slower, louder or more clearly.** Don’t be embarrassed to say, “I can’t hear you, please speak louder.” Being open and direct with your doctor and treatment team helps you leave the appointment with more clarity.

**Be honest and detailed.** Instead of just saying “Oh, fine” or “Not so good” when a doctor asks how you are, let them know exactly how your illness is affecting you physically and emotionally. Keep a journal detailing the side effects of treatment to make these details easier to share.

**You deserve to be comfortable.** Speak up and tell your doctor about your pain, fatigue or other symptoms of discomfort, even if the doctor does not ask you directly. Remember, their job is to take care of you.

Read CancerCare’s fact sheet entitled “Doctor, Can We Talk?: Tips for Communicating With Your Health Care Team” for more information.

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## WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT

Although your health care team will try to give you the best care possible, there may be times when you are dissatisfied, disappointed or angry. If these feelings affect your trust in your doctor, you need to explain your experience in a way that can be heard and understood. If you find yourself getting frustrated, avoid raising your voice as it will not help you get better care. Here are some helpful hints about what to do if you or a loved one wants to complain about the care you received:

- Remember that you have a right to be heard.
- Speak to the person you are upset with. Arrange a time that is convenient for both of you.
- Allow the person to respond.
- Discuss the situation with a social worker. They may have some suggestions on how to handle this kind of difficulty.
- Often, hospitals have patient representatives whose main responsibility is to resolve these types of conflicts and help improve patient/health care team communication.
- You can also speak to the nursing supervisor, the primary doctor on your team or a hospital administrator. Explain your situation and ask them for assistance.

**Get a second opinion.** A review of your diagnosis and recommendations for treatment by another doctor is called a “second opinion.” This is often done to make sure you are getting the best advice. It is your right as a patient and gives you confidence in the medical care you are receiving. A second opinion may offer different treatment choices or agree with your present care.

Read CancerCare’s fact sheet entitled “When to Get a Second Opinion” for more information.



### **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 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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