



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CAREGIVERS AND LOVED ONES

Learning that you have cancer can be intensely stressful, followed by treatment that can lead to fatigue and other negative side effects. During this time, you may have offers of help. How you set expectations and manage the care others give you can have significant benefits for your well-being.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE YOUR DIAGNOSIS AND DESIRES

The days following a cancer diagnosis often involve not only your own emotional response and need to plan for treatment ahead, but also the need to inform others. Friends, family, co-workers or other acquaintances may not know how to react to such news, and you may find yourself consoling them or investing your energies in ways that are not helpful to yourself.

Consider how much you feel you need to tell. Practice short responses such as, “I have found out that I have cancer. It is very scary to be diagnosed, but I have a great team of doctors who are helping me.” It is okay to feel emotional during these discussions, but also okay when you do not. People may ask questions you find inappropriate, such as about treatment, side effects or mortality, or they may start telling stories you are not ready to hear. There is nothing wrong with stopping them firmly to say, “I appreciate the concern, but I would rather focus on the positive,” or, “I prefer not to discuss the details right now.”

If a person is available to help, they can become a great asset to your team of care. Whether you have plans already or have ideas for the future, it is best to communicate your desires right away, even to tell them you may need them soon. For more advice on navigating your own emotions, please read our booklet “Coping With Cancer: Tools to Help You Live.”



HANDLING THE EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR CAREGIVERS

It is important not to assume that you need to handle everything on your own. Delegating responsibilities and asking others for help can permit you to focus on the specifics of your treatment and your own emotional well-being. These requests can include everyday tasks that become more difficult due to fatigue or the constraints of time.

Allow family and friends to help. Even small bits of assistance can have a big impact. When someone offers to help, try to avoid saying “Nothing right now, I’m fine.” This could limit future offers of support. Instead, you could say, “I may have something for you later, if that’s okay. I’d love to let you know soon.” When you do need help, say “yes.”

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Often, people will want to help but do not know how. If you are not clear in what you need, you may risk losing out on significant boosts or not getting what you need. Be specific in your desires so that everyone knows their role. Your caregivers may try to become “fixers” to every problem that comes up or try to solve every issue immediately, which may not always be what you are looking for. Sometimes, there are no perfect solutions. It is okay to ask your loved ones to listen to your thoughts and feelings, positive or negative, and simply be with you.

HOW OTHERS MAY HELP

It may help to jot down a list of things for others to do. Think about simple and clear ways to express your needs, such as, “I could use a ride. Would you take me to my next appointment?” or, “I would really appreciate a hand taking care of my child this afternoon. Would you mind stopping by for an hour or two?”

These can include pet care or household chores, grocery shopping and other everyday forms of maintenance. Loved ones can feel valued by being included. Even young children can help by doing their homework or cleaning up their belongings. Older children can help by walking the dog, washing the car or other age appropriate tasks that may take additional effort for you at this point in time. It may even be nice to do something entertaining: “I really need to take my mind off things,” you might say. “Could you invite me to do something fun this weekend?”

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.cancercares.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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CARING FOR YOUR CAREGIVERS

Taking care of someone with cancer can be very difficult. It can be stressful in terms of energy and resources among the emotional turmoil of uncertainty and despair, which they may be reluctant to show or express. Especially if you have a sole caregiver, it may be beneficial to encourage them to take care of themselves even as they care for you.

They may feel a need to dedicate every ounce of themselves to your care, but this can lead to burnout. Encourage them to take time to rejuvenate and relax outside the shared responsibilities of your care. CancerCare offers support groups and counseling for caregivers, delivered by professional oncology social workers, free of charge. For more on how to handle the pressures of caregiving, you may direct them to our fact sheet “Caring Advice for Caregivers: How Can You Help Yourself?”

*Edited by Lauren Chatalian, LMSW
This fact sheet is supported by Takeda Oncology.*



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