



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancer.org  
www.cancer.org

# fact sheet

## DOCTOR, CAN WE TALK?: TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

Talking to your doctor can be difficult. A diagnosis of cancer may leave you feeling frightened or overwhelmed, but good communication with your doctor will help improve the quality of the care you receive.

### WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

As a patient, it is important to remember that you are a consumer of health care. The best way to begin making difficult decisions about health care is to educate yourself about your cancer and who is on your health care team, including nurses, social workers and patient navigators.

**Start a health care journal.** Having a health care journal or notebook will allow you to keep all of your health information in one place. You may want to write down the names and contact information of the members of your health care team, as well as any questions for your doctor. Keep a diary of your daily experiences with cancer and treatment. You can separate your journal or notebook into different sections to help keep it organized.

**Prepare a list of questions.** Write down your questions and concerns about your illness and treatment before your next medical appointment. Write down the most important questions or concerns first. This way, you won't forget to ask about something that was important to you. Remember to try and make your questions specific and brief as your doctor may have limited time. Ask your most important questions first.

**Bring someone with you to your appointments.** Even if you have a journal and a prepared list of

questions or concerns, it is always helpful to have support when you go to your appointments. The person who accompanies you can serve as a second set of ears. They may also be able to think of questions to ask your doctor or remember details about your symptoms or treatment that you may have forgotten.



**Write down your doctor's answers.** Taking notes will help you remember your doctor's responses, advice and instructions. If you are unable to write down the answers, ask the person who accompanies you to do it for you. A mobile device can also be used to take notes as well. Writing down notes will help you when you need to review the information at a later time.

**If your doctor allows it, record your visit.** Recording your conversation with your doctor gives you a chance to hear specific information again or share it with family members or friends.

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## SAYING AND HEARING: TIPS FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOCTOR

**Use “I” statements.** Doctors may use medical language that is normal for them but may be unfamiliar to you. If you’re having trouble understanding your doctor, say, “I don’t understand.” This will be much more effective than saying, “You’re being unclear.”

**Be assertive.** If you don’t know or understand something, don’t be afraid to speak up and ask. Make your questions specific and brief. If you continue to be confused or overwhelmed or feel the question has not been answered in a way you understand, you may want to ask your doctor or nurse if there is another time that the two of you can discuss it in more detail. Ask your doctor how you can reach them, whether by phone or email, outside of office hours in case you have additional questions.

**If something is unclear, try repeating it back to your doctor.** This is called “mirroring” and is sometimes effective in clarifying what is being said. You might start with the words, “So you mean I should...” or “So I think you are suggesting that...” If you understand better with visual aids, ask your doctor to write down information about your diagnosis or your treatment. Asking to see the X-rays or slides may also be helpful.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Here are some questions to ask your doctor or nurse to help you understand your treatment and follow-up:

- What is my specific diagnosis?
- What is the stage of my cancer?
- Have you treated other patients with my type of cancer?
- What are my treatment options?
- What is the recommended treatment?
- How often will I receive treatment?
- What are the possible side effects?
- What are the possible benefits and risks of this treatment?
- How much will my treatment cost?
- If I have questions during my treatment and my doctor is not available, who can I ask? Who can I call? For example, if you are not available, is a nurse, social worker or other specialist available?
- Is there any information that I can read about this treatment or procedure?
- Is there anything else I should know?

## 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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*Edited by Kathleen Nugent, LCSW*

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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