

# **Communicate With Your Health Care Team**

## **Why is it important to communicate with your health care team?**

Your health care team is made up of doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists and any other medical professionals who care for your physical and mental health. Each member of your health care team is specially trained to treat certain aspects of your life after cancer.

Communicating with your health care team means:

- Asking them any questions you have
- Talking with them about how you feel
- Telling them about any changes in your body
- Letting them know if you have any worries or concerns that overwhelm you

For good communication, it's important that you and the members of your health care team take the time to listen to each other's questions and concerns. Sometimes members of your health care team seem very busy, like they don't have time to talk. For many survivors, the visits are often very short. It's important that you speak up and ask them to make time to answer your questions.

Preparing for your health care team visit is a very important part of good communication. You will make the most of your time in the visit if you provide clear information and ask questions when you don't understand. If you don't tell your health care team your concerns or don't ask your questions, they will not know what your concerns are. Everyone's communication style is different and what works for one person might not work for another. However, it's extremely important that you find a way in which you are comfortable communicating with your health care team. When you get answers to your questions, you feel confident about the health care you are receiving.

## **Who might have trouble communicating with their health care team?**

Everyone can have difficulty communicating. Talking about your health or your cancer experience may seem especially difficult. Research shows that cancer survivors of all education levels and backgrounds can have a hard time communicating with their health care team. After all, communication skills aren't usually taught in school. Some people are just better at communicating than others. However, if you want to have an active role in your medical care, learning how to communicate with your health care team is extremely important.

Some survivors come from backgrounds that have a deep respect for medical professionals, yet they find it uncomfortable to ask them questions. You might think that it is disrespectful to question your health care team. Your health care team does deserve respect, and so do you. You deserve to have your questions answered. If you tell your team what you do and do not understand, they will be able to create the best treatment plan for you. Knowing you can ask questions builds trust with your health care team. Many survivors do not prepare for their health care team visits. They may forget important questions or concerns if they don't write them down before the visit. You might not be comfortable speaking up and asking questions. This isn't always easy to do. It takes practice to become comfortable asking questions. Over time, it does get easier.

Survivors who speak a different language than their health care team may need to communicate with the help of an interpreter. This requires that everyone involved be patient and clear about what they want to say.

Good communication is very important for survivors who have problems with their hearing or have memory and concentration problems. Having a family member or friend at the visit can help make sure that important information is given to the health care team and that the best treatment plan is created.

Sometimes the personalities and communication styles of the survivor and some members of the health care team are not a good fit. Tell a trusted team member about your communication concerns, and ask for suggestions on how to have better communication. If you try to improve your communication with certain team members, and your visits are not getting better, you might need to change medical professionals.

## **What are some signs that you may benefit from better communication with your health care team?**

If you have the following concerns, you may benefit from better communication with your health care team:

- You leave the office feeling like you still have questions or that the questions you asked were not answered
- You or your family members think you never have enough time with members of your health care team to discuss your questions or concerns
- Your health care team members don't seem open to discussing a question, concern or problem you have

If one member of the team cannot answer a question, other members of your team should be able to help. If you continue to have problems, it is OK to change medical professionals.

Sometimes members of your health care team suggest that you seek a second opinion or direct you to another person who they feel can better answer your questions. This does not mean that they don't care about you or your question. It usually means they want to make sure you get the best possible answer from the right person. Not all health care professionals communicate in the same way, which is why it's even more important that you communicate your concerns and ask members of your health care team questions when you aren't sure about what they are telling you.

## **How can good communication with their health care teams benefit survivors?**

Good communication with your health care team can help you:

- ✓ Know up-to-date and accurate information about your cancer and possible aftereffects of treatment
- ✓ Participate in making decisions about your medical care
- ✓ Manage your symptoms and get good follow-up care
- ✓ Make the most of the time you have with your health care team
- ✓ Reduce stress by making sure your questions are answered
- ✓ Feel confident that you are getting the best health care

You may not be familiar with certain medical terms or know anything about the types of medicines your health care team prescribes. Asking a lot of questions may be the only way you are able to understand how to best take care of your health after cancer. Having open lines of communication with your health care team may help make you aware of any changes in health care, treatments or insurance coverage.

Some possible changes you might want to discuss with members of your health care team:

- ✓ Knowledge of cancer, successful treatments and possible side effects that may change through research
- ✓ Changes in insurance policies that might affect decisions that you and your health care team will make
- ✓ New programs or resources that might be available after you have completed your treatment that weren't available when you started

## **When should you communicate with your health care team?**

The easiest time to communicate with your health care team is during scheduled visits when you can discuss your concerns face to face. Sometimes, however, you may want to discuss things with a member of your health care team in between appointments. If it's a medical emergency, contact your health care team right away. Don't wait for your next scheduled appointment. However, if it's something that can wait, but you want to know before your next scheduled appointment, either schedule an appointment for an earlier date or ask the member of your health care team to call when they have time to discuss your concerns over the phone. You can also write a list of your questions and fax or mail this list to your health care team. They can prepare answers when they have time and then call you to discuss them.

## **Will you always need to communicate with your health care team?**

It is important for both survivors and members of their health care team to recognize that there will always be a need to ask questions and talk over new information, even years after your treatment for cancer ends. This means that new questions and new answers are to be expected. Good communication with your physician and health care team will help you get better care. This begins from the moment of diagnosis throughout the remainder of your life.

## **How can you communicate with your health care team?**

Below is a brief list.

- Use the Cancer Survivor's Health Journal to prepare for your next visit with a member of your health care team
- Be active during the visit
- Repeat what the health care team tells you and agree on a treatment plan
- Bring a friend or family member with you
- Find out about the new policies related to HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act)
- If you speak English as a second language, find an interpreter to help you communicate with your health care team

## Local Resources

**Cancer Lifeline Seattle**  
Dorothy S. O'Brien Center  
6522 Fremont Ave N  
Seattle, WA 98103  
206-297-2100  
[www.cancerlifeline.org](http://www.cancerlifeline.org)

**Seattle Cancer Care Alliance**  
Social Work Department  
825 Eastlake Ave E  
PO Box 19023  
Seattle WA 98109-1023  
206-288-1076  
e-mail [socialw@seattlecca.org](mailto:socialw@seattlecca.org)

## Works Cited

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National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship. Cancer Survival Toolbox: Module 2, Communicating. 1999.

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