# Better Doctor/Patient Communication Means Better Outcomes in Cancer Care

American Cancer Society study finds patients who were satisfied with communication had better health results at lower cost.

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A new study from the American Cancer Society has found cancer patients who reported greater satisfaction in the way their provider communicated with them, wound up receiving more efficient care with fewer office visits and better health outcomes. The findings were published in the latest issue of JNCCN—Journal of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network.

“Our study suggests that when cancer care providers are more effective communicators, their patients are more likely to follow medical advice and medication protocols,” said lead author, Ashish Rai, PhD, Surveillance and Health Services Research, American Cancer Society. “Cancer survivors are distinct from many other patients, in terms of their provider communication-related needs and expectations. They are more likely to be older and have additional health concerns. Being diagnosed with cancer and hearing complex information about treatment, costs, and prognosis can cause anxiety. On top of that, there is the fear of possible recurrence. All these factors and more can make cancer survivors particularly sensitive in their perception of good care or communication.”

The researchers used data from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS) from 2008 through 2014, to track outcomes for 4,588 cancer survivors; 2,257 were between 18-64 (median age 54), the other 2,331 were 65 and older (median age 75). Communication satisfaction was measured by the Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS), in conjunction with the MEPS data.

Patients used a four-point scale ranging from “never” to “always” to track whether their providers (1) listened carefully, (2) explained things in a way that was easy to understand, (3) showed respect for what the respondent had to say, and (4) spent enough time with the respondent. A global zero-to-ten satisfaction rating scale was also factored into a composite score, and tracked across 12 months. The researchers then measured outcomes based on the number of emergency department visits, office visits, and total healthcare spending (including medication and out-of-pocket costs).

In both age groups, patients with better baseline health reported higher satisfaction levels, suggesting that more complex circumstances negatively impacted patients' perception of their communication. The more comorbidities a patient had, the lower their satisfaction rating, highlighting the importance of coordinating care across a team of providers.

"The results of this study present an interesting challenge: those survivors most in need of good communication about complex medical issues may not be receiving the information they seek in a manner that they find helpful. That in turn results in higher health care utilization and expenditure," commented Crystal Denlinger, MD, FACP, Chief, GI Medical Oncology, Fox Chase Cancer Center, Chair of the NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology (NCCN Guidelines) Panel on Survivorship. "This could be due to many factors, including time constraints, competing priorities, and increasingly complex cancer therapies. This study highlights the need for additional research into how to tailor the health care experience both during and after cancer treatment, in order to communicate more effectively."

"Communication needs vary from patient to patient," said Dr. Rai. "While time constraints do pose a challenge, the amount of time spent is only one of the attributes of effective communication. By tailoring their communication strategy to a patient's specific needs, providers may be able to communicate more effectively in the same amount of time."

Dr. Rai also pointed out the importance of delegating both clinical and communication duties to colleagues as needed. As another time-saving measure, the study also cites earlier research demonstrating better outcomes for patients who had the option of communicating with their provider electronically.

Ultimately, the researchers concluded that effective provider communication can improve outcomes by streamlining care, alleviating anxiety, boosting mutual trust, and increasing treatment adherence. To read the entire study, visit JNCCN.org. Complimentary access to "Determinants and Outcomes of Satisfaction With Healthcare Provider Communications Among Cancer Survivors" is available until October 10, 2018.

About the National Comprehensive Cancer Network

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), a not-for-profit alliance of 27 leading cancer centers devoted to patient care, research, and education, is dedicated to improving the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of cancer care so that patients can live better lives. Through the leadership and expertise of clinical professionals at NCCN Member Institutions, NCCN develops resources that present valuable information to the numerous stakeholders in the health care delivery system. As the arbiter of high-quality cancer care, NCCN promotes the importance of continuous quality improvement and recognizes the significance of creating clinical practice guidelines appropriate for use by patients, clinicians, and other health care decision-makers.

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