

How Clinical Trials Help to Increase Cancer Survivorship in Quantity and Quality

Jennifer Diamond, MD, talks about clinical trials of cancer treatments and interventions to treat side effects in survivors.

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Survivorship rates for nearly every type of cancer have increased over the past 20 years, and they continue to do so thanks to cancer researchers who develop and test new treatments.

A vital step in that research process is [clinical trials](#) — studies of new medications or treatments in humans before they are approved for widespread use.

Clinical trials are the final step in a yearslong process that begins with laboratory research and animal models. Clinical cancer trials are designed to answer questions about new treatments or new ways of using old treatments and how well they work. These trials may test drugs or vaccines, ways to perform surgery or deliver radiation therapy, or combinations of many treatments. A doctor may offer patients the option to join a clinical trial as part of their treatment plan.

Addressing quality of life

Just as important as increasing the length of survivorship is improving the quality of life of people who have been treated for cancer, says [Jennifer Diamond](#), MD, medical director of the [Cancer Clinical Trials Office](#) at the [University of Colorado Anschutz Cancer Center](#).

“There’s a renewed push to develop evidence-based strategies to help cancer survivors deal with short-term and long-term side effects of cancer therapies and improve quality of life for cancer survivors,” she says. “That includes clinical trials of drugs to treat the hot flashes associated with some [breast cancer](#) treatments and supportive care trials looking at things like pain, nausea, and extreme fatigue some people experience after cancer treatment.”

→ [Find a clinical trial at CU Anschutz](#)

Advancing therapies

Clinical trials have led to new treatment categories over the past few decades, including immunotherapy, which boosts a patient's immune system to fight cancer, and antibody drug conjugates, a way to deliver chemotherapy drugs to specific places in the body.

"We see themes in oncology clinical trials over time," Diamond says. "We had the huge immunotherapy boom, and now we have immunotherapy drugs approved for many cancer types. Then we had trials of antibody drug conjugates, and we are now seeing benefits from antibody drug conjugates approved in many different cancers. More recently we're seeing clinical trials for what we call cell therapies, including [CAR T cells](#) and [tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes](#)."

There are two participants in every clinical trial, Diamond says — the researchers overseeing the investigation, and the patients who volunteer to take part, often in a selfless move to improve outcomes down the road for others with the cancer for which they are being treated

"The advances that we see in the treatment of cancer and improved outcomes would not be possible without clinical trial participants and patients volunteering to be part of research studies," Diamond says. "We're so grateful to clinical trial participants, as well as their families and friends for supporting them. Many times, participating in a clinical trial requires extra time spent at the medical center, extra questionnaires to fill out, extra visits, extra procedures. The patients who participate in clinical trials contribute a lot to the system of developing new drugs."

Comprehensive research

The CU Anschutz Cancer Center is one of 58 National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer centers around the country, meaning it meets rigorous standards for transdisciplinary, state-of-the-art research focused on developing new and better approaches to preventing, diagnosing, and treating cancer — including leading its own clinical trials and serving as a site for national trials led by other institutions.

"We are the only NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center in the state of Colorado, with research programs where we're turning homegrown science into clinical trials and offering a lot of

different options for patients, from national group studies to pharmaceutical-sponsored studies to investigator-initiated studies,” Diamond says. “People can be seen here for a second opinion to talk about clinical trials, but they also should always feel comfortable asking their physician if there’s a clinical trial that’s an option for them.”

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