Getting a Second Opinion

Here are eight second opinion tips.

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When you receive a cancer diagnosis, your doctor will usually suggest a treatment plan. Receiving so much information about such a serious health matter can be overwhelming. But don't feel pressure to make a decision on the spot.

You are entitled to ask as many questions as you need to and to get clear answers—you want to be as informed as possible when it comes to your health. A good step before committing to a treatment plan is seeking a second opinion from a different medical provider.

Don't worry about appearing rude or insulting your doctor. Getting a second opinion is common practice. It's better to be open with the professionals you speak with. Let them know who else you're talking to and what each of them says. You can ask your first doctor to recommend someone else to talk to—preferably a specialist at an unrelated institution who may offer different approaches to testing, care and treatment. If the two doctors arrive at different diagnoses or suggest different plans, you may ask them to discuss their conclusions together.

Most insurance providers, including Medicare, will cover the cost of a second opinion in the case of a cancer diagnosis. If your first and second opinions are very different, a third opinion will usually be covered too. Policies differ, however, so make sure to check with your insurance provider in advance.

Remember that getting a second opinion is not only normal but also recommended. Whether you're diagnosed with one of the most common cancers or a rare one, advice from another medical professional can help you feel more confident and empowered to choose the best course of treatment for you.

8 Second Opinion Tips

1. You are the last word in your care. Speak up if anyone on your medical team is pressuring you or making you feel rushed or afraid.
2. Ask your insurance provider about coverage for a second opinion—and a third one, if needed.
3. If your diagnosing doctor can't or won't offer a referral, you may find one at an academic medical center or through the National Cancer Institute.

4. Be clear that you’re seeking a second opinion when you make an appointment with the new doctor.
5. When you go, bring your medical records, including pathology or surgery reports and your diagnosing doctor’s proposed treatment plan.
6. If possible, bring a family member, friend or caregiver to your appointment.
7. Discuss the second opinion with your first doctor and see whether the two are willing to speak with each other.
8. Ask your medical or insurance provider about getting guidance from an oncology social worker, who can help you find specialists and prepare for appointments.

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