Newly Diagnosed? Start Here

Learning that you have cancer can be overwhelming. Take these steps to get the best care.

December 13, 2021 By Bob Barnett

When you get a cancer diagnosis, your life may feel upended. You may worry about survival, how treatment will affect you and your loved ones, how you'll pay bills. Even good news can be stressful: With so many new advances, you may face a bewildering amount of information. The first step? Take a deep breath. Find out how quickly you need to make decisions about treatment. You may have more time than you realize. Here's how to take charge:

Educate yourself. Learn about your specific cancer, including its stage and any genetic information that may be used to guide treatment options.

Find the best care team. Some cancers can be treated well by a general oncologist or hematologist. But if you have a complex or rare cancer, your local team may work with a specialist in your particular cancer, allowing you to get advanced diagnosis and treatment planning while receiving day-to-day care near home.

Consider a second opinion. Getting an evaluation from a different doctor or oncology team is your right and standard practice in medicine.

Ask about clinical trials. Your medical team can tell you whether a clinical trial may be appropriate for you. When standard care has drawbacks or is ineffective, a trial can help you access the newest therapies.

Learn the risks and benefits of your treatment plan. Ask about the purpose of each treatment, how likely it is to work for you and what side effects to expect.

Minimize side effects. Pay attention to your symptoms, and let your medical team know about anything that concerns you. Identifying distressing symptoms early may lead to helpful interventions that can allow you to remain on your treatment plan. Medications may prevent nausea from chemotherapy. Complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, massage, yoga and music therapy, available at many cancer centers, may help alleviate specific symptoms while improving your sense of well-being.

Safeguard your quality of life. Ask about cancer rehab services, palliative care services (for issues such as pain) and survivor resources. Concerned about anxiety or depression? Request a

screening by a mental health professional who can help you find support.

Know your insurance. Cancer care can pose serious financial challenges. Protect yourself by learning what your insurance will cover, how to appeal denials and how to catch billing errors. Ask about working with a financial navigator.

Connect to support groups. Ask about cancer-specific support groups where you are treated. Look online too. For many cancers, nonprofit organizations provide medically reviewed information and connect you with people experiencing exactly what you are. Find them here: cancerhealth.com/resources.

Create a wellness program. Eating well, exercising and finding healthful ways to handle stress can help keep your body strong and minimize fatigue and other side effects of treatment.

Get help from friends and family. It’s fine to ask them for specific help, such as preparing meals, helping around the house, picking up children from school, managing bills or just providing entertaining distraction.

Live your life in the present. You are always more than your cancer.

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