Cancer Treatment

Getting a Second Opinion

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. Remember, 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.

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 provider in advance.

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

If your doctor can't or won't offer a referral, you may find one through the National Cancer Institute or at an academic medical center. You might ask your medical or insurance provider about getting guidance from an oncology social worker or an oncology nurse navigator who can help you find specialists and prepare for appointments.

When you make an appointment, tell the new doctor's staff that you're seeking a second opinion. They may ask you to provide more information, such as test results. Bring your records to the appointment. These may include pathology reports, surgery reports and the proposed treatment plan from your original diagnosing doctor. Consider asking a family member, friend or caregiver to come with you to your second-opinion appointment, for moral support and to help you remember information.

Getting a second opinion is not only normal but also recommended. Whether your diagnosis is 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.

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