Cancer 101

Newly Diagnosed? Start Here

Learning that you've been diagnosed with cancer can be overwhelming—and terrifying. You may dread side effects of treatment, worry about survival and feel anxiety about how your life may be upended, all while trying to process a lot of new information and make important decisions about your care.

These are natural first reactions. But you'll soon discover more empowering ones. The first step is to realize that cancer treatment is rapidly improving. The odds of not only surviving but also having a good quality of life are higher for many people newly diagnosed with cancer than they were just a few years ago. It's also important to know that you don't need to do everything immediately. Instead, take a few positive steps now to help yourself stay well before, during and after your treatment.

The more you learn about your cancer and your treatment options and find support, the more you'll feel in charge of your care. Learning to take charge will not only help you feel better; it's also key to getting the best care and living your best life as a survivor.

Here are some first steps you can take after you've been diagnosed with cancer.

Educate yourself about your specific cancer, including its stage and any genetic information that may be used to guide treatment options. Establishing good communication with your medical team is key—here are some tips to get started.

Bring a friend or family member to your next doctor's appointment. A buddy can take notes, ask questions and help you process what you've learned and what actions to take.

Find out how quickly you need to make decisions about treatment. You may have more time than you realize. The more you are able to fully explore your treatment options, the more likely you'll feel confident with your decisions.

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

Learn about the risks and benefits of treatments you are considering. Learn as much as you can about the different therapies available, how likely they are to work for you and what side effects or other risks are associated with them. Treatment studies can be confusing—here's a primer on how researchers measure effectiveness.

Ask about the side effects of treatment. Most cancer therapies have side effects, but these can vary a lot from person to person. Work with your medical team to develop a plan to minimize them. Many medications can relieve side effects such as nausea. Additionally, many cancer centers offer complementary therapies such as acupuncture, massage and music therapy that can help minimize side effects and improve quality of life.

Consider a clinical trial. New treatments are tested in clinical trials before they become widely available. Joining a trial can be a good way to gain access to the newest therapies, but they carry some risks. Ask your medical team which clinical trials may be appropriate for you.

Get emotional help. A cancer diagnosis can lead to, or worsen, psychological issues such as anxiety and depression. Request a screening by a mental health professional such as a social worker who can help you find resources and support.

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

Gather your personal support team. Your friends and family want to help but may not know how. Let them know what you need. It’s fine to ask for specific help such as preparing meals, helping around the house, picking up children from school, managing bills or just providing entertaining distraction.

Connect to support groups. Whatever you are going through, there is likely someone out there who has already been through it—and whose story can help you. Start with these reliable cancer support groups. Find strength and solace in learning how others have navigated cancer.

Know your insurance. Cancer care can pose significant financial challenges. Protect yourself by learning what your insurance will cover, how to appeal denials and how to catch billing errors. Inquire about working with a financial navigator to find resources to manage the money side of things.

Be your own best advocate. Be assertive in finding the resources that will help you cope—they are out there, but you may need to actively seek them. Pay attention to your symptoms and let your medical team know about anything that concerns you.

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

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