

Knowing How to Best Communicate with your Doctor

Improving Communication with your Doctor and Health Care Team

If you are concerned that you and your doctor or health care team are having trouble communicating, it is very important that you find a way to improve communication. You and your doctor need to work as a team. You need to ask the questions you have but do so in a way that also respects the doctor's time and availability. Being upfront about how you feel – and what you do or do not understand – helps both you and your doctor take care of your health. It is your body, your health, and your life, and you need to know what's going on with all three. This relationship is perhaps one of the most important aspects of your cancer treatment so you need to feel that you and your doctor can work effectively together.

It is also important that you understand medical terms and treatment options. You have the right to make choices, whether the doctor agrees with those choices or not. If your doctor does not treat you with respect, repeatedly shows impatience with your questions, or does not consider your opinions, it may be time to change doctors. That said, you have a responsibility to communicate clearly with your health care team. They cannot read your mind or know how to help you if you do not talk with them openly and honestly.

One of the best ways to improve communication with your health care team is to be well prepared for your visits so that you can make the most of your time. There are a few things you can do to make sure you leave the doctor with a clear understanding of what was discussed and what you need to do.

- Bring a friend or family member with you to help take notes.
- Make a list of questions and concerns to share with the doctor and/or nurse and refer to it from the beginning of your appointment.
- Don't save difficult questions for the moment the doctor or nurse is headed out the door of the treatment room. Let them know up front that you would like to have a serious discussion about a topic that is worrying you so you can both make the best use of your time together.
- If your doctor prescribes new medications or a different treatment plan, write (or have someone with you write) this information down. Once your doctor is done, read your notes back to the doctor or nurse. This will help catch any information you may have missed or didn't understand.
- If you cannot do what the doctor is asking in the treatment plan, ask for other options.
- Consider talking with the nurse or an oncology social worker if you are concerned about communicating with your doctor. They may have good suggestions that may help improve the conversation.

Communicating when you are under stress is never easy. Chances are with the diagnosis of cancer you have had to learn many new words and go through many different kind of tests and treatments than you ever had before. This is a new experience and a stressful one. Your doctor and health care team want to work closely with you so that you can feel well and less stressed. Like all relationships, it can take time to feel that you can be open and direct. Don't be afraid to speak up, to let your doctor know that you would like to improve the way the two of you discuss your cancer care. This will help to reduce your distress and could have an impact on your overall cancer experience.