

Improving Communication with Healthcare Teams for CHWs

Community Health Workers, or CHWs, play an important role in helping a person navigate a cancer diagnosis.

- 1 Help patients communicate more effectively with their healthcare team.
- 2 Empower patients to maintain communication with their healthcare team.

PROVIDING GUIDANCE ON SELECTING A HEALTHCARE TEAM

It can be hard for people diagnosed with cancer to find the right doctor. Where a patient lives, their insurance status, and their finances can impact the process of choosing a doctor. As a CHW, you can help patients and their loved ones choose doctors who listen, understand, and communicate effectively with them.

Help individuals consider these factors when choosing their healthcare team:

Factor to consider	Questions to ask a patient or their loved ones	Advice CHWs can give to their client
Past relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you were previously diagnosed with cancer, would you like to see the same doctors?• Do the doctors listen and take your needs and concerns into account?• Do you trust these doctors?	It may be empowering to meet with more than one doctor as a comparison. Even after meeting with other doctors, you can choose to continue with your original doctor.
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a doctor or nurse you trust who can recommend a medical oncologist for you?• Do you have a friend, colleague, or relative you trust who has had a good experience with a doctor they would recommend?	There may be a recommended doctor or hospital in your trusted circle(s). Consider asking family, friends, neighbors, members of your church, or others you trust for recommendations.
Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is your doctor a general oncologist or do they specialize in the kind of cancer you have?• Do they attend medical conferences and keep up with cancer research?	Advances in treatment happen quickly. It may be advantageous to find someone who is up to date on the latest research. Look for a doctor who treats the same type and subtype of cancer as your diagnosis.

Approach to treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you prefer a doctor who tells you all of your treatment options and leaves the final decision up to you, or a doctor who tells you what they think is best? • Do you prefer a doctor that recommends many tests and combined treatments, or a more focused approach? 	There is no right or wrong answer to treatment decisions, but the decision is yours, and it is important to have a doctor who values your priorities and preferences when it comes to treatment. Check out CSC's Open to Options program for support in value-based decision-making about treatment.
Availability of clinical trials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the cancer center offer clinical trials? • Are they willing to refer you to other clinical trials? 	Some treatments with the best chance of success may be available only through clinical trials. But not all treatment centers offer clinical trials. And not all centers have the same clinical trials. Be sure to ask about local clinical trials that might be right for you.
Geographic location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you get there and how often will you need to go? • Are you able to travel farther if it means getting better care? 	Consider travel distance for appointments. Offer different transportation options if getting to the appointments is a barrier.
Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the doctor of your choice covered by your insurance? 	Check with your insurance provider and your doctor to make sure your care will be covered. Ask about appointments, tests, and treatments. Some healthcare organizations or insurance providers have a filterable list of providers that can help patients select the right doctor(s). Many insurance cards have the phone number or website on the back of the card.
Urgent care needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the doctor available for urgent care needs? • Does this doctor work with a team? • Who is available to answer questions during off hours? 	It can be reassuring to know where to go and who to ask when emergencies happen. Find out what care looks like outside of normal business hours or while the doctor is away.

Patients may also use these resources to find a doctor:



- American Society of Clinical Oncology
- National Cancer Institute-Designated Cancer Centers

ENCOURAGING ONGOING POSITIVE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE TEAM

One of the most important things a CHW can do for someone living with cancer and their loved ones is to help them communicate effectively with the healthcare team. A person living with cancer may have different care teams before, during, and after cancer treatment. **Keeping communication open is important.**

While frequent communication with doctors can be time-consuming and sometimes hard to manage, it can feel reassuring to know who to ask for help from and where to find it. When there are changes to the care team, treatment ends, or there are breakdowns in communication, it can be hard to adjust. As a CHW, you can help people living with cancer and their loved ones advocate for their needs, seek out resources, and provide support.



THREE WAYS TO ENCOURAGE POSITIVE COMMUNICATION WITH A CANCER CARE TEAM:

1 Prepare: One of the best ways to encourage a person living with cancer or their loved one to have ongoing positive communication with their healthcare team is to help them prepare for visits.

Ask Questions. Sometimes, people don't know what questions to ask during appointments. Taking time to walk through potential questions can help your client create a list of questions they want to review at the next appointment. Always encourage individuals to write down anything they are concerned about and questions they have, regardless of how insignificant they feel.

Ask your client if they have any questions about the following:

- Scheduling future appointments or screenings.
- Signs and symptoms to watch for before, during, or after treatment.
- Safe approaches to physical activity.
- Choosing healthy foods to eat.
- How treatment may impact sexual health.
- How treatment may impact fertility.
- Other health risks or conditions.

Keep track. Encourage patients and their loved ones to have a dedicated place, either on paper or digitally, where they keep track of things. This may include tracking medications, symptoms, and feelings between appointments. They should make a note of any symptoms and side effects and record what they notice, when it happens, and how long it lasts.

Providing a notebook may help your client stay organized and prepared. Notebooks should be easy to carry and accessible, with pockets for additional resources.

2 Take Notes: It's very common for patients and their loved ones to leave a doctor's appointment wondering what was just said. There are a few things you can do as a CHW to help people impacted by cancer leave their appointments with a clear understanding of what was discussed and what they need to do.

Encourage your clients to:

Bring a caregiver, friend, or family member to help take notes during their appointment.

Ask their doctor whether they can record the conversation to help remember information. Note that doctors do have the right to say no.

Ask for other options when their doctor recommends something that doesn't align with their capabilities, priorities, wants, and needs.

Read the notes back to the medical professional once they are done giving information. This will help them catch any information they may have missed or didn't understand.

➤ If the doctor prescribes new medicines or a different treatment plan.

➤ Any directions the doctor or nurse explains about follow-up tests.

➤ The time and date of the next appointment.



3 **Address difficulty with communication:** People of all backgrounds can have a hard time communicating with their healthcare team. If anything on the list below sounds familiar, the problem may be communication:



After many of your office visits, you have questions that weren't answered very well or that you didn't get a chance to ask.



It seems as if you never have enough time during office visits to say what is on your mind or address your concerns.



Members of your healthcare team often seem rushed, distracted, or uninterested in something you want to discuss.

If you find yourself experiencing any of these feelings, consider finding another member of your healthcare team who is easier to talk with. This person may be a nurse, social worker, or patient care coordinator. They may be able to get answers to your questions or help improve communication with the doctor. Most healthcare teams and treatment centers have a messaging app, like MyChart. Most offices have a team member who will respond.

If, after trying all of this, you still don't feel comfortable with the communication you're having, it may be time to look at the possibility of seeing another doctor. You may also consider contacting the treatment center's patient advocacy office. They can help you navigate communication with doctors and a change of doctor if needed.

CSC's CHW Oncology-focused Training Program is for community health workers who are interested in gaining skills and knowledge to better assist members of their community impacted by cancer. The program provides free cancer-specific educational resources and intentional opportunities for CHWs to share best practices and build peer connections. Visit our website to learn more about the program and access free resources for CHWs:
<https://www.cancersupportcommunity.org/community-health-worker-program>

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