

# Working With Your Skin Cancer Care Team



Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. Treatment for cancer usually involves many appointments with different healthcare experts. During this time, you will get to know your healthcare team. The team can include doctors, nurses, social workers, and other healthcare professionals who work together. This is often called “multidisciplinary care”.

This fact sheet talks about the importance of having a “multidisciplinary” healthcare team when treating skin cancer. It will provide advice to help you communicate with your care team. It also has additional resources for more information and support that can be beneficial throughout your experience.

## WHAT IS SKIN CANCER?

Skin cancer often begins as an unusual, uncontrolled growth on the skin. This type of cancer often develops on sun-exposed areas like the face, head, and neck. Still, it can be found on all parts of the body, even areas that are rarely exposed to sunlight. This can include the nails and soles of the feet.

Skin cancers are usually named after the type of cell that is affected. The more commonly diagnosed skin cancer types include:

**Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC):** BCC is the most common type of skin cancer. It starts in the basal, or lowest, layer of the epidermis. The epidermis is the outer layer of skin on the body that you can see and touch.

**Cutaneous Squamous Cell Carcinoma (cSCC):** cSCC starts in the epidermis from the flat squamous cells that lie on top of the basal layer of the skin. It is also known as Squamous Cell Carcinoma of the Skin or Squamous Cell Skin Cancer.

**Melanoma:** Melanoma is a type of cancer that begins in the melanocytes. These cells make the pigment melanin. Melanin gives our skin its color.

**Merkel Cell Carcinoma (MCC):** MCC is not as common as BCC, cSCC, or even melanoma. It develops in the special nerve cells that lie within the skin.



### Some rarer forms of skin cancer include:

**Sebaceous Carcinoma (SC):** SC is a rarer cancer that develops on the skin around the eyelid.

**Dermatofibrosarcoma protuberans (DFSP):** DFSP is a rare type of skin cancer that typically grows slowly. It develops in the middle layer of the skin, called the dermis.

**People of all skin tones are at risk of developing skin cancer.** Signs of skin cancer can show up differently for people of color. For example, signs of melanoma in people of color may appear under the fingernails and between the toes.

Learning about the types of skin cancer and the signs and symptoms to look for can help you and your healthcare team catch the disease early. When found early, skin cancer can be easy to treat and cure.



If you notice anything unusual, talk with your doctor. This may be a new dark spot, a sore, or patch of skin that won't heal. Do monthly skin self-checks. Check all the surfaces of your skin and look closely at your moles. These monthly checks can help you notice if any moles begin to change in shape, size, or color. It may help to take pictures of any moles or bumps you are concerned about. This can also help you keep track of any changes.

For more information about the different types of skin cancer visit, [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer).



### **WORKING WITH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY HEALTHCARE TEAM**

Cancer treatment can be complex. It changes often as new treatments become available. You need a care team you can trust. This will help you play an active role in your treatment.

Your healthcare team will include doctors, nurses, social workers, and other professionals who work together. This is often called “multidisciplinary care”. It is important to work with a “multidisciplinary” care team because each professional will bring specialized knowledge and a different set of skills. Having a diverse skill set will be helpful when deciding how to best treat your cancer and manage the side effects.



## KEY MEMBERS OF YOUR HEALTHCARE TEAM

The members on your care team may vary at different points in your cancer care. These members may include:

**Primary Care Physician** – understands your medical history, preferences, and how you would like to manage your general health throughout your treatment and beyond.

**Dermatologist** – specializes in diagnosing and treating skin problems, including cancer.

**Pathologist** – examines tissue samples under a microscope for cancer.

**Radiologist** – specializes in diagnosing skin cancer using medical imaging scans. These can include X-rays, MRI, CT scans, and PET scans.

**Radiation Oncologist** – manages radiation treatments. Radiation therapy is the use of high-energy rays to kill or damage cancer cells.

**Medical Oncologist** – diagnoses and treats cancer. They will offer cancer treatment options and referrals. It is important to find an oncologist that specializes in skin cancers.

**Surgical Oncologist** – performs surgery to remove cancer tumors and cells.

**Plastic Surgeon** – performs reconstruction after skin cancer surgery. Reconstruction is a surgical procedure that helps rebuild the look of the area where the cancer was removed. Plastic surgeons are certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

**Head and Neck Surgeon** – performs procedures to diagnose and treat conditions in the head and neck area.



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**Mohs Surgeon** – performs a procedure where layers of skin are removed and looked at under a microscope. This process allows the surgeon to completely evaluate the area. Layers of skin are removed until no more cancer cells are left.

**Palliative Care Specialist** – helps manage symptoms, pain, and side effects that may come up during treatment. Palliative care is different from hospice care and end-of-life care. It is available to you at any point of your treatment experience.

**Psychologist/Psychiatrist** – provides mental healthcare to support you before, during, or after treatment. A psychiatrist can also prescribe medicine.

**Oncology Social Worker** – provides counseling. They can also help you and your family find resources to cope with financial, transportation, and home care needs.

**Patient/Nurse Navigator** – helps you navigate your care experience from the time you are diagnosed through treatment. They can help you talk with your healthcare team, set up appointments, and help with home care needs.


**Oncology Nurse Practitioner (NP)** – specializes in cancer and can diagnose and treat medical problems and prescribe medicine. They may see you with your doctor or independently. This may be the person you contact with urgent questions or concerns.

**Registered Nurse (RN)** – administers treatments and other medicines. They can help you understand your cancer diagnosis and treatment. They can be a good source of information and support.

**Nutritionist/Registered Dietitian** – recommends foods and advice to help you eat comfortably and get the nutrients you need. Look for a registered dietitian who has experience working with people with cancer.

**Oncology Pharmacist** – has special training in cancer medicines. They can teach you about drugs and how they interact. They can help you manage side effects. They also may help you find co-pay assistance or discounts.





Skin cancer is easier to treat and cure when it is found early.

## IMPORTANCE OF TIMELY CANCER CARE

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Skin cancer is easier to treat and cure when it is found early. Once the cancer spreads to other parts of the body it can be harder to treat. Timely cancer treatment is important to receiving the best care experience. This includes seeing the right specialist to treat your stage of cancer at the right time.

If you have early-stage skin cancer, that has not spread to other areas of the body, you will typically work with a dermatologist for treatment. You may also interact with a Mohs surgeon during this time.

If you have advanced cancer, or cancer that has started to spread, a surgical oncologist and medical oncologist will typically lead your treatment plan. They will help determine what treatment option will be best and can refer you to other specialists like a radiation oncologist.



Here are some questions you can ask your care team to ensure you receive timely cancer care. If you feel that your physician is not addressing your needs or concerns, consider getting a second opinion.

*What type of biopsy or surgery am I having?*

*How soon will I know the results?*

*What is the plan if the tumor is cancerous?*

*Do you work with a multidisciplinary care team?*

*If my skin cancer is advanced, does this office have a radiation and medical oncologist that I can consult with? When can I consult with them for treatments other than surgery?*

## GETTING A SECOND OPINION

At any point in your care, you can ask for a second opinion. Many people with cancer get a second or even third opinion to confirm their diagnosis and review treatment options. Another hospital or doctor may offer a different treatment, including clinical trials, or more useful support services. They may be a better fit for you in other ways. Do not worry about hurt feelings. You can always return to the first doctor if you want. **But remember timely cancer treatment is key when deciding to seek multiple opinions.**

## COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE TEAM

It is important to stay in communication with your primary care physician or dermatologist before a skin cancer diagnosis even occurs. Once you are diagnosed, regular communication with your care team throughout your treatment will be key.

It is important that you can have honest and open conversations with your healthcare team. Make sure you share your concerns, ask questions, and feel like you are being heard throughout your cancer experience.

Tell your team about any side effects or symptoms you experience at any point in your treatment. This can include any changes to your skin, eating habits, energy levels, or GI side effects (like nausea, constipation, or diarrhea). It may be helpful to keep a running list of questions or concerns you would like to discuss at any upcoming appointments.



Visit [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer) for more resources on talking with your cancer care team.





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## TREATMENT PLANNING

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Throughout the cancer experience, you may work with your healthcare team to make several decisions. You might help choose the type of treatment, the timing of treatment, or the order of treatments. You may have the option to join a clinical trial. Making these choices is called “treatment planning”.

Good communication with your doctors will make treatment planning easier. Talk with them about your needs and preferences. Ask about the goals of the treatment. Also ask how each treatment might affect your personal goals. Make sure you understand why one treatment might work better than another. Be sure to bring up any concerns you may have.

## FINDING SUPPORT

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It helps to have emotional support, both during and after cancer treatment. Talking with people who understand your experience can help you cope and feel in control. A good support system can also help you with practical things. Talk with your healthcare team about resources for social, emotional, and practical support. Ask if they can connect you to a support group for people with skin cancer.

The back page of this resource includes a list of trusted organizations. CSC and many other organizations have helplines, support groups, online discussion boards, and more ways to seek support from others who have cancer.



## BEING YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

As the patient, you are an active member of the healthcare team. At any point in your care, feel free to bring up any questions or concerns with your doctor or other healthcare team members. Asking questions and sharing your opinions in the decision-making process will help you feel more in control. Your input is important and should help direct your cancer care experience.

If you feel that your concerns are not being addressed or question if you are seeing the correct specialist, you have a right to advocate for yourself. It is important to advocate for yourself—even when you are uncomfortable or in pain—to make sure that you get the support you need.

There are resources available if you need help advocating for yourself. Talk with a social worker, nurse navigator, or patient navigator. Their role is to help you through this process and get you the right care at the right time. Listen and trust yourself. You know your body best and your opinion matters!





## SKIN CANCER RESOURCES

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### **AIM at Melanoma**

833-236-3635 • [www.AIMatMelanoma.org](http://www.AIMatMelanoma.org)

### **AIM at Skin Cancer Foundation**

<http://www.AIMatSkinCancer.org>

### **American Cancer Society**

800.227.2345 • [www.Cancer.org](http://www.Cancer.org)

### **Melanoma Research Foundation**

800-673-1290 • [www.Melanoma.org](http://www.Melanoma.org)

### **CancerCare**

800-813-4673 • [www.CancerCare.org](http://www.CancerCare.org)

### **Skin Cancer Foundation**

[www.SkinCancer.org](http://www.SkinCancer.org)

### **Merkelcell.org**

[www.Merkelcell.org](http://www.Merkelcell.org)

### **American Academy of Dermatology Association**

[www.AAD.org/Public/Diseases/Skin-Cancer/Types](http://www.AAD.org/Public/Diseases/Skin-Cancer/Types)

### **Patient Advocate Foundation**

800-532-5274 • [www.PatientAdvocate.org](http://www.PatientAdvocate.org)

### **National Cancer Institute**

800-422-6237 • [www.Cancer.gov](http://www.Cancer.gov)

## Cancer Support Community Resources

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**Cancer Support Helpline®** — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (888-793-9355), available in 200 languages Mon-Thurs 11am-8pm ET and Fri 11am-6pm ET.

**Open to Options®** — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling 888-793-9355 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

**Frankly Speaking about Cancer®** — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs.

**Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs** — With the help of 190 locations, CSC and Gilda's Club affiliates provide services free of charge to people touched by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more at a location near you.

**Cancer Experience Registry®** — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at [www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org](http://www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org).

**MyLifeLine®** — CSC's secure, online community welcomes anyone impacted by cancer to easily connect with community to reduce stress, anxiety, and isolation. Create a personal network site and invite friends & family to follow your journey. And participate in our discussion forums any time of day to meet others like you who understand what you are experiencing. Join now at [www.MyLifeLine.org](http://www.MyLifeLine.org).

**Grassroots Network** — Make sure your voice is heard by federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors by joining our Network at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate).

This publication is available to download and print yourself at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Skin-Cancer).

For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit [Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org](http://Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org)

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