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Seeking a Second Opinion

When you're facing cancer treatment, it's normal to wonder if another doctor could offer more information or a different treatment option. You might want to find another doctor who can look at your test results, talk with you about your personal situation, and maybe give you a different take on it. Getting a second opinion can help you feel more sure about your diagnosis and treatment plan.

Is there enough time to wait for a second opinion?

Treatment decisions should be made after you have learned all you can about your diagnosis, prognosis, and available treatment options. This can take time, depending on the type of cancer you have. In a few cancers, there are some treatment decisions that have to be made right away. But usually, you can take some time to think about them, and you should think about them. If you are concerned about waiting to start treatment, you should talk to your doctor.

Why get a second opinion?

Reasons for getting a second opinion include:

- You want to be sure you have explored all options.
- You think your doctor is underestimating how serious your cancer is.
- Your doctor is not sure what is wrong with you.
- You have a rare or unusual cancer.
- You think another treatment might be available.
- Your doctor is not a specialist in your type of cancer
- Your doctor tells you there is uncertainty about the type or stage of cancer you have

- Your doctor gives you a few different treatment options.
- You're having trouble understanding and communicating with your doctor, or you want your options explained by someone else.
- You just want peace of mind that you have the correct diagnosis and that you are making the right treatment choice.
- Your insurance company asks you to get another opinion before you start treatment.

Remembering what your doctor says

It's hard to understand complex information when you are anxious or afraid. And sometimes, without knowing it, doctors use words that you don't understand. If you don't understand something, ask your doctor to explain it to you.

Even if the doctor carefully explains things, you may not hear or remember all that is said. Here are some ways to help you remember everything your doctor tells you.

- Take a family member or friend there with you.
- Take notes on what your doctor says.
- Ask if there are pamphlets or booklets about the information the doctor is telling you.
- Ask if you can record your talks.

Even after you have given your doctor a chance to carefully explain your cancer to you, you still may decide getting a second opinion is right for you.

How to talk to your doctor about getting a second opinion

Some people find it hard to tell their doctors that they'd like a second opinion. Remember it is common for patients to get a second opinion, and doctors are comfortable with the request. If you are unsure of how to begin, here are a few ways to start the conversation:

- "I'm thinking of getting a second opinion. Can you recommend someone?"
- "Before we start treatment, I'd like to get a second opinion. Will you help me with that?"
- "If you had my type of cancer, who would you see for a second opinion?"

- “I think that I’d like to talk with another doctor to be sure I have all my bases covered.”

The second opinion process: what to expect

Before you start looking for a second opinion, contact your insurance company to find out what your policy covers. In some cases, you may have to get a second opinion from another doctor who is part of your health plan before the plan will pay for your treatment

It’s important to be able to give the new doctor the exact details of your diagnosis and planned treatment. Make sure you have the following information handy and always keep copies for yourself:

- A copy of your pathology report from any biopsy or surgery
- If you had surgery, a copy of your operative report
- If you were in the hospital, a copy of the discharge summary that every doctor prepares when patients are sent home
- A summary of your doctor’s current treatment plan or the plan that has been given to you as an option
- Since some drugs can have long-term side effects, a list of all your drugs, drug doses, and when you took them

You can ask your current doctor’s office for copies of your records. If you have had treatment or tests in a hospital or clinic, you may need to contact their medical records department to find out how to get these records. Sometimes you can request your records through an online patient portal if your doctor's office, treatment center, or hospital has one.

Deciding where to go for a second opinion

Let your doctor know if you want to get a second opinion. Most doctors understand the value of a second opinion, and they are not offended when a patient wants one. They may even be able to recommend another doctor.

The following are some other possible resources for finding an oncologist:

- Local hospital, medical clinics or cancer centers
- [American Board of Medical Specialties¹](#)

- [American Medical Association](#)²
- [American College of Surgeons](#)³
- [American Society of Clinical Oncology\(ASCO\)](#)⁴

Making sense of the second opinion

Although cancer patients seem to be asking for a second opinion more frequently, studies show the benefits of getting one are unclear . If the second opinion differs from the first, you may find the following tips helpful:

- Make an appointment with your first doctor to talk about the second opinion.
- Ask both doctors to explain how they arrived at their treatment plan
- Ask them how they interpreted your test results
- Ask what research studies or professional guidelines they consulted
- Ask what they have recommended to other patients in your same situation
- Ask if it is possible for the two doctors to review your case together
- You also might need to get 3rd opinion from another specialist— a pathologist, surgeon, medical oncologist, or radiation oncologist — to talk about the two opinions and give their opinion on your situation.
- You may need to do your own research on the latest treatment guidelines. Two good sources are the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Treatment Guidelines (www.nccn.org⁵) and the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) PDQ® Cancer Treatment Summaries (www.cancer.gov⁶). Both are available in versions for health professionals (which use medical language and terminology) and patients (which use everyday language).

Hyperlinks

1. <http://www.abms.org/verify-certification/certification-matters-service-for-patients-and-families/>
2. apps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder
3. www.facs.org/for-patients/
4. <http://www.cancer.net/find-cancer-doctor>
5. <http://www.nccn.org>
6. <http://www.cancer.gov>

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Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html)

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