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## Where to Find Cancer Care

When you learn you or a family member has cancer, you want to get the best possible medical care and treatment. Choosing your doctor and treatment center will be one of the most important decisions you'll make. There are many excellent doctors and cancer centers in the United States, but will you know where to look to find them?

- [Choosing a Cancer Center or Hospital](#)
  - [Choosing a Cancer Doctor](#)
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## Choosing a Cancer Center or Hospital

When you or another family member has cancer, you want to get the best possible medical care and treatment. Choosing a cancer center or hospital can be one of the most important decisions you'll make. There are many excellent cancer care centers in the United States, but how do you know where to look?

Here are some things to think about as you choose where you want to get treated.

### **Ask for recommendations**

The doctor who found your cancer is the first person you should ask. Try asking: "If you or someone you loved had this cancer, where would you go for treatment?" Often, the doctor will suggest a cancer center even if you don't ask.

If your doctor isn't sure of your diagnosis, but thinks there's a chance you might have

cancer, you can ask: “If you were in my place, where would you go first?” Ask for at least 2 or 3 suggestions and find out if you need a cancer center that specializes in a certain type of cancer. Then find out if these cancer centers accept your health insurance plan.

## Finding a cancer center or hospital

You might find these websites helpful in locating information about cancer centers near you.\*

- [The Association of Community Cancer Centers<sup>1</sup>](#) (ACCC) offers a state by state list of cancer programs that belong to their organization. You can find profiles for each cancer center including basic information such as contact info, treatments offered, and special cancer services.
- The National Cancer Institute (NCI) is part of the US National Institutes for Health. The NCI works with nearly 70 cancer centers in the United States through its [National Cancer Institute Cancer Center Programs<sup>2</sup>](#). These cancer centers are recognized for their leadership in cancer research and cutting edge treatments.
- [The Association of American Cancer Institutes<sup>3</sup>](#) (AACI) provides a state by state directory of member institutions in their member directory. Their membership includes academic and freestanding cancer centers across the US and Canada.
- The Children’s Oncology Group (COG) offers a [listing of cancer centers<sup>4</sup>](#) that have experts who treat children and teenagers with cancer. Most children and teens with cancer are treated at large pediatric cancer centers. Pediatric cancer treatment is usually offered to children from birth to age 18 or 19, although some groups extend pediatric treatment to age 21.
- The American College of Surgeons offers a list of breast centers accredited through their [National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers<sup>5</sup>](#). To be accredited, centers must meet standards for providing services, participating in clinical trials, continuing physician education, and community outreach.

\* Inclusion of a facility or a health care professional in any of these databases does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.

## Choosing a cancer center

Be sure to find out how much experience a center has in treating your type of cancer. It's important to know the cancer center can provide all the services you need. For

example, larger hospitals may have more experience with different kinds of cancers and offer more services for people with cancer. This is extra important if you have a type of cancer that is rare or more challenging to treat.

Our [How to Choose a Cancer Center or Hospital](#)<sup>6</sup> worksheet can help you figure out what questions to ask and keep track of the information you find. For instance, you might want to ask:

- What type of treatment facilities they have
- Who is part of the cancer care team
- Whether they have tumor boards where experts in different types of cancer care meet to discuss the best way to care for a person with cancer
- You can also ask your doctor and other health care providers about their experience with the cancer centers you are looking into.

If you live in a small town, you may need to travel to a larger city to find a center the best meets your needs. This may be the key to getting the best possible treatment and might be worth the extra travel or inconvenience to you. Larger cancer centers or hospitals are also more likely to have [clinical trials](#)<sup>7</sup> (research studies) you might be able to take part in.

In addition, you may want to see whether the healthcare organizations you are looking at are accredited using specific quality standards.

- The Joint Commission accredits and certifies healthcare organizations based on a variety of quality measures. Accreditation by The Joint Commission does not necessarily mean the organization has expertise in cancer care, but is a measure of overall quality of services. To check a healthcare facility, you can go to their [Quality Check](#)<sup>8</sup> website. If you don't have Internet access, you can call The Joint Commission customer service line at 630-792-5800.
- The [Commission on Cancer](#)<sup>9</sup> (CoC) is the cancer quality program of the American College of Surgeons (ACoS). The CoC accredits organizations that are committed to quality cancer care. To be accredited by the CoC, a cancer care organization must meet certain standards and offer a range of state-of-the-art cancer services. No matter its size or location, a cancer center's ability to deliver quality cancer care is monitored by the CoC. CoC-approved cancer programs are found in many different kinds of hospitals or facilities. They may be freestanding or in major medical centers, community hospitals, or other diagnostic and treatment centers.

You can search for an accredited cancer center near you on the CoC website.

## Hyperlinks

1. <http://www.accc-cancer.org>
2. [www.cancer.gov/research/infrastructure/cancer-centers](http://www.cancer.gov/research/infrastructure/cancer-centers)
3. [www.aaci-cancer.org/](http://www.aaci-cancer.org/)
4. [www.childrensoncologygroup.org/index.php/locations/](http://www.childrensoncologygroup.org/index.php/locations/)
5. [www.facs.org/quality-programs/napbc](http://www.facs.org/quality-programs/napbc)
6. [/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-hospital-worksheet.pdf](https://www.cancer.org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-hospital-worksheet.pdf)
7. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html)
8. [www.qualitycheck.org/](http://www.qualitycheck.org/)
9. [www.facs.org/quality-programs/cancer/coc](http://www.facs.org/quality-programs/cancer/coc)

## References

American College of Surgeons. Commission on Cancer: Improving Outcomes for Patients with Cancer. [facs.org](http://www.facs.org/quality-programs/cancer/coc). Accessed at <https://www.facs.org/quality-programs/cancer/coc> on September 15, 2021.

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National Cancer Institute. Finding Health Care Services. [Cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov). Accessed at <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/managing-care/services> on August 3, 2021.

The Joint Commission. About Quality Check®. Accessed at <https://www.qualitycheck.org/> on September 15, 2021.

Last Revised: September 17, 2021

# Choosing a Cancer Doctor

When you learn that you or a family member has cancer, you want to get the best possible medical care and treatment. Choosing a doctor will be one of the most important decisions you'll make.

Finding the right cancer doctor (oncologist) can take time. It is important that you find a doctor you feel comfortable with and who will work with you through your diagnosis and treatment. Ask the doctor who found your cancer if you need to find a cancer doctor right away or if you can take some time to check out your options.

## Decide what you need and want in a doctor

First, you need to look for a doctor who treats your type of cancer. You may need a special type of oncologist or even more than one kind of oncologist for your treatment. The most common types of cancer doctors include:

- Medical oncologists
- Hematologist-oncologists
- Surgical oncologists
- Radiation oncologists
- Pediatric oncologists
- Gynecologic oncologists
- Dermatologic oncologists

Some doctors in large cancer centers limit their services to people with specific types of cancer. For example, you might be able to locate an oncologist who specializes in treating breast, prostate, lung, colorectal, or other types of cancer. This can be extra helpful if you have a rare type of cancer or one that is hard to treat.

During your cancer treatment you may see more than one kind of cancer doctor, but your cancer and treatment type will determine who your main cancer doctor will be. Carefully choosing the doctor you need will help you navigate treatment. Your relationship with this person will probably last through treatment into long-term follow-up care.

Before you start looking for a doctor, think about the qualities you want your doctor to have. A few ideas are listed below, but there may be others you want to add.

- Choose a doctor who has experience treating your type of cancer. You want someone who is familiar with and uses the latest standards, guidelines, and research.
- You'll need a doctor who is part of your health insurance plan (often called a preferred provider) and/or accepts your health insurance.
- Pick a doctor who practices (has privileges) at a cancer center or hospital that you're willing to use. Doctors can only send patients to cancer centers or hospitals where they have admitting privileges.
- Choose a doctor you feel comfortable with. Languages spoken, sex, and education may be important to you. You may also have strong feelings about personality and how they should communicate with you. Some people want their doctors to have a business-like manner, while others value a doctor who can help with their emotional health as well as their medical needs.

## **Make a list of doctors who might be a good fit**

Our worksheet called [How to Choose a Cancer Doctor](#)<sup>1</sup> may be useful during this process. It includes tips on how to find names of cancer doctors and questions that can help decide who the best fit for you is.

You may want to start by getting referrals from people you trust. The doctor who found your cancer is the first person you should ask. Try asking: "If you or someone you loved had this cancer, which doctor would you go to for treatment?" In many cases, the doctor will suggest another doctor even if you don't ask. If your doctor isn't sure of your diagnosis, but thinks there's a chance you might have cancer, you can ask: "If you were in my place, which doctor would you see first?" Ask for at least 2 or 3 names, and find out what these [doctors' specialties](#)<sup>2</sup> are.

You might also speak with others in your area who have been treated for the type of cancer you have. Some hospitals and communities also have physician referral services available by phone or online. These allow you to learn more about the doctors in your area, such as their areas of expertise, medical certifications, office locations, languages spoken, and so on. You can find these referral services by calling a cancer center or hospital's main number or visiting their websites.

There are also online national directories of medical doctors, including those that specialize in cancer.\* Each provides a search option so you can look for the type of doctor you need.

- The American Board of Medical Specialties offers [Who's Certified](#)<sup>3</sup>. This database allows you to verify the specialty, certification status, and location of any physician certified by the 24 Member Boards of the American Board of Medical Specialties.
- The American Medical Association has [Doctor Finder](#)<sup>4</sup>. This database offers information on most licensed physicians in the United States, including doctors of medicine (MD) and doctors of osteopathy or osteopathic medicine (DO).
- The Association of State Medical Board Executive Directors offers [DocFinder](#)<sup>5</sup>, health professional licensing database. It has licensing and disciplinary information about physicians in the states where they practice.
- The American College of Surgeons offers [Find a Surgeon](#).<sup>6</sup> You can search this database to find surgeons by location, specialty (such as colorectal surgery) and subspecialty (such as breast surgery).
- The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) offers [Find a Cancer Doctor](#)<sup>7</sup>. This database allows you to search for ASCO members by the doctor's name, practice location, and medical specialty certification.
- American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology (ASTRO) has [RT Answers](#)<sup>8</sup>. This webpage includes a searchable database of radiation oncologists by location and interest in specific types of cancer.
- American Society of Hematology (ASH) offers [Find a Hematologist](#)<sup>9</sup>. This website helps people with blood cancers (lymphoma, leukemia and multiple myeloma) and other blood disorders find hematologists in their area.
- American Brain Tumor Association (ABTA) provides [Find a Brain Tumor Center](#).<sup>10</sup> This site allows you to search for brain tumor treatment centers in different parts of the United States.
- Society of Gynecologic Oncology offers [Seek a Specialist](#)<sup>11</sup>. This tool can help you find specialists in gynecologic cancers (such as ovarian, uterine, cervical, vulvar, and vaginal cancers) in your area.
- Society of Urologic Oncology has [Find a Provider](#)<sup>12</sup>. This site helps you to search for specialists in urologic cancers (such as prostate, bladder, kidney, testicular and penile cancers) in your area.

\*Inclusion of a healthcare professional in any of these databases does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.

If you have health insurance, you should check the names you get against their list of network doctors. Usually, you can do this online or by calling the member services hotline.

## Finding out more

Once you've found doctors that seem like a good fit for you, call their offices and ask if they're on your health insurance plan and are taking new patients. You might also want to find out which cancer centers and hospitals they work in and where they can admit patients.

If you can do it, the next step would be to set up appointments with a few doctors. Check with the doctors' offices and your insurance company to find out if this kind of visit is covered. If these visits are not covered, you may want to ask some of these questions on the phone until you've narrowed down your choices.

Ask the doctors how much experience they have treating your type of cancer. If you're meeting with a surgeon, find out how often they do the type of surgery you need, how many of these surgeries they have done, and what their success rate is. You may also have to ask how they define "success," depending on the cancer type.

Along with finding out the doctor's medical experience and credentials, notice how comfortable you feel with them. One way to measure this is to ask yourself:

- Did the doctor give you a chance to ask questions?
- Did you feel the doctor was listening to you?
- Did the doctor seem comfortable answering your questions?
- Did the doctor talk to you in a way that you could understand?
- Did you feel the doctor respected you and what is important to you?
- Did the doctor mention treatment options and ask your preferences?
- Did you feel the doctor spent enough time with you?

Trust your instincts when deciding if the doctor is right for you. It may take more than one visit before you and your doctor really get to know each other.

## Other things you might want to know about a cancer doctor

### Is the doctor board certified?

Board certified doctors have had extra training in special areas, such as medical oncology (cancer care), hematology (diseases of the blood), or gynecologic surgery (female reproductive system). They have taken and passed certification tests approved by doctors in their field. To keep their certification, doctors must continue to keep up with advances and changes in their specialty area.



Not all doctors who are specialists are board certified, and doctors don't need to be board certified to be excellent caregivers. Still, many doctors become board certified in at least one specialty.

To find out if a doctor is board certified, contact the [American Board of Medical Specialties](#)<sup>13</sup> (ABMS). The ABMS has a list of board certified doctors who subscribe to the ABMS service. You can do a free search for all doctors in a certain specialty by state. Or you can type in the name of the doctor to learn about their specialty.

### **What's the doctor's experience?**

You might want answers to these questions:

- How long has the doctor been in practice?
- How many people with your type of cancer have they treated?
- If you're thinking about surgery or a special procedure, how many of these procedures has the doctor done ?
- How many patients is the doctor currently treating?
- How many are cancer patients?

You may also want to find out who the leading specialists in the field are, if any are in your area, or if you might need to travel to find one. A visit to a medical library or your local library may be useful. You can research doctors on the Internet, too. You can start with us, or go to other respected websites like [cancer.gov](#)<sup>14</sup> or [medlineplus.gov](#)<sup>15</sup>. Look for the names of doctors who have written about the cancer you have and whose work is most often quoted. If your doctor has published research, you might be able to look at those articles online or get copies at the library. By doing so, you can learn more about the doctor's approach to cancer treatment.

### **At which cancer center or hospital(s) does the doctor have privileges?**

More than ever, cancer is treated outside the hospital. However, for some treatments and problems, a hospital stay is needed. Where you will get inpatient hospital cancer care depends on where your doctor practices. Find out where you would go for surgery or other care. Check with your health insurance plan to see which doctors and hospitals are covered.

### **Is the doctor affiliated with any medical schools?**

Teaching at a respected medical school may suggest that a doctor is a leader in their

field. Doctors who teach and take care of patients may be in contact with medical experts around the country. And they might know more about the latest treatments.

### Other questions to ask the doctor

- Are you or your practice involved in clinical trials (medical studies) of new treatments?
- What are your office hours?
- How can I get help after hours, on weekends, or on holidays?
- Who will see me when you're away?
- Who else will be on my cancer care team?

It might be helpful to ask around about a doctor's reputation if you have any concerns. You should feel comfortable not only with your doctor's ability to treat your cancer but also with how they treat you as a person. Can you talk with this doctor? Do they listen to you? If you don't get the right answers, keep looking.

### Second opinions

Even after you have chosen your doctor, you might want to get a second opinion. This is a good idea if you feel uncertain about the proposed treatment. For instance, if you have prostate cancer and a urologist has recommended surgery, you may want to see a radiation oncologist to learn about non-surgical treatment.

We have more on the steps you can take to get a [second opinion](#)<sup>16</sup> on your cancer treatment plan.

### Hyperlinks

1. </content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/worksheets/choosing-a-doctor-worksheet.pdf>
2. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/choosing-your-treatment-team/health-professionals-associated-with-cancer-care.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/choosing-your-treatment-team/health-professionals-associated-with-cancer-care.html)
3. [www.abms.org/](http://www.abms.org/)
4. [doctorfinder.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/home.jsp?](http://doctorfinder.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/home.jsp?)
5. [administratorsinmedicine.org/](http://administratorsinmedicine.org/)
6. [www.facs.org/for-patients/](http://www.facs.org/for-patients/)
7. [www.cancer.net/find-cancer-doctor](http://www.cancer.net/find-cancer-doctor)
8. <http://www.rtanswers.org/>

9. <http://www.hematology.org/education/patients/find-a-hematologist>
10. [www.abta.org/about-brain-tumors/treatments-side-effects/find-a-brain-tumor-center/](http://www.abta.org/about-brain-tumors/treatments-side-effects/find-a-brain-tumor-center/)
11. [www.foundationforwomenscancer.org/](http://www.foundationforwomenscancer.org/)
12. [suonet.org/resources/find-a-provider.aspx](http://suonet.org/resources/find-a-provider.aspx)
13. <http://www.abms.org>
14. <http://www.cancer.gov>
15. <http://www.medlineplus.gov>
16. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/choosing-your-treatment-team/seeking-a-second-opinion.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/choosing-your-treatment-team/seeking-a-second-opinion.html)

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Last Revised: September 17, 2021

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