

InforMED Decision-Making for Cancer Patients Ten Strategies for Developing an Effective Treatment Plan

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Stunned, frightened, overwhelmed, and depressed are just a few of the emotions that patients experience after they learn that they have cancer. In spite of being in a state of mental and emotional turmoil, important decisions need to be made about treatment. Some cancer patients report that surviving the decision-making process can be almost as challenging as surviving the cancer. Here are some tips that can help to reduce the stress associated with developing your plan for treatment.

Take some time to figure things out

Patients often are pressured by doctors, family, and friends to start treatment immediately. In rare cases, there is an immediate need for intervention; a blockage that interferes with function and requires surgery, for example. But in almost all cases, patients can take a few weeks or sometimes even a few months to look into all of the available options before making a decision. This can be very important for cancer patients because choosing the wrong treatment plan can result in not only ineffective treatment but a weakened body that can be less likely to respond to alternative treatments. Additionally, outcomes are highly dependent on a patient's confidence in treatment choices. Take the time to consider your options and to make the right decision for you.

Assemble a team

A small group of clear-headed advisors to accompany you to appointments, and assist you with things like asking questions, making calls, and evaluating research can be very helpful. These advisors do not need to be medical professionals, but they do need to be open-minded and willing to objectively look at and consider options with you.

Find out if you really have cancer

This may sound absurd, but every day people are told they have cancer who do not have cancer. This is due to the more prevalent practice of disease mongering, which is defined as broadening the definition of disease so that more people are diagnosed and the market is expanded for treatment. This practice benefits drug companies and medical institutions, but not patients. For example, Ductal Carcinoma in Situ, DCIS, is a risk factor for cancer, yet women are treated as if they have cancer, with surgery, radiation, and sometimes drugs. Men are equally overdiagnosed. PSA, prostate specific antigen, is not a marker for cancer and testing for it has resulted in hundreds of thousands of men being treated for prostate cancer who did not have it. Make sure you really have cancer before getting treated for it.

Decide to practice InforMED Medical Decision Making

This means having a clear understanding of the risks and benefits associated with any test, drug, or procedure BEFORE consenting to it. In many cases, treatment benefits are exaggerated and the risks are minimized, and sometimes not mentioned at all. Patients often learn that treatments offer few benefits and significant side effects AFTER the treatments fail or side effects become painfully apparent. A common statement made in my office starts with "If I had known then what I know now..." Make sure you have a thorough understanding of the risks and benefits of any treatment *before* you start.

Postpone making decisions until your emotional state improves (a bit)

The worst decisions about anything important are made in a highly emotional state. It is normal to experience a wide range of emotions when diagnosed with cancer, including fear and panic. While these feelings do not totally resolve within a few weeks, they usually dissipate just enough to allow you to think more clearly and to make better decisions.

Reassure your friends and family and ask for their support

Many times, well-meaning friends and family members pressure patients to follow their oncologist's advice, and to begin treatment right away. They become frightened when patients talk about taking time to conduct research and consider options, and sometimes become terrified when patients say that they might fire their doctor or choose an alternative path. Provide details about your plans for investigating options to your friends and family and ask them to be patient for a short time. Setting a date by which you will be ready to decide can be helpful for both you and for them and offer to share your research after you have gathered it. The presentation of organized information that clearly shows benefits and risks can often help those close to you to feel more comfortable about your choices.

Ask for published research for all recommendations made by your doctors

Your doctors should be willing to provide you with published research supporting the treatments recommended to you. Looking at this type of information is the only way that you can determine if a treatment is right for you. If your doctor refuses to provide research, you might consider "firing" him/her and seeking another doctor, or consulting with someone else who can find and review information with you.

Evaluate the risks and benefits of treatments before making a decision

Most of the time, the benefits of treatment are expressed in relative terms, which can deceptively make treatments seem much more effective than they actually are.

Here's an example. A study reports that that the incidence of cancer recurrence in patients receiving a treatment is 2.0%, and the incidence of recurrence in the group that does not have the treatment is 4.0%. The treatment is commonly represented as decreasing the risk of recurrence by 50.0%, since 2.0% is half of 4.0%. This sounds impressive, but the absolute risk reduction, the benefit to you, the person receiving

treatment, is only 2.0%, or the real difference between the two numbers. For many people, a 2.0% reduction in risk does not sound nearly as impressive, and enthusiasm can be lessened even more when considering the potential risks and side effects.

To continue our hypothetical example, let's say that the incidence of serious side effects in the group receiving treatment is 10.0%. You might conclude that a 2.0% reduction in the risk of recurrence is not worth the 10.0% risk of experiencing serious side effects.

You should have all of this information about all of your options *before* you make your choices.

Practice wholism instead of reductionism

Cancer is a complicated disease, and regaining health usually requires a comprehensive strategy. Eating optimally is important, but eating well while receiving treatment with a low efficacy rate may not result in the outcome you are seeking which is living a long life! Many cancer survivors attribute their success to using many strategies which together constitute a comprehensive plan for changing their health and their lives.

Stay flexible

It's ok to change your mind if you feel that something is not working for you or you discover new information. You can stop treatment, check out of a hospital, change doctors, or visit a clinic in another location, even if others discourage you from doing so. Remember that you are the person who has the most to gain or lose from decisions related to your treatment. Taking control of your health and your life is very important for cancer patients.

Wellness Forum Health offers a Cancer Concierge Program which includes access to dozens of online lectures, assistance with research, one-on-one appointments with our dietitians and other health professionals, meal planning, cooking instruction, and more! For more information, email pamopper@msn.com