

For Teens: A Guide to Cancer Treatment



Cancer can flip your whole life upside down. One moment, you're worrying about school, your job, or weekend plans. The next, you're decoding complex medical terms as if they're a foreign language.

Consider this your cheat sheet for cancer treatment options. It's a good starting point for understanding what might come next. But remember, just like in school or at your job, there's never a silly question. Feel free to ask your healthcare team anything. Most importantly, know that you don't have to navigate these decisions on your own. A lot of people can help you get through this!

Types of treatment

You may have 1 treatment or a combination of treatments to manage your cancer. The most common treatments for cancer are:

Surgery

Types of surgery include:

- **Staging.** This helps your team find out how much cancer is in your body and how far along it is. Knowing these details will help them find the right treatment plan for you.
- **Curative.** This removes the cancer completely.
- **Debulking.** This takes out part of the cancer to make the tumor smaller. It can help other treatments like chemotherapy or radiation be more successful.

Chemotherapy

Also known as chemo, this treatment uses powerful medicine to fight cancer. It's a systemic treatment. That means it affects your whole body. Your oncologist (cancer doctor) will decide what chemo medicine is right for you. They'll also decide how much and how often you need it for the best result.

Chemo might be the only treatment you need. Or it could be 1 piece of a more complex treatment plan.

Radiation

This treatment destroys or damages cancer cells through high-energy particles or waves, such as X-rays. More than half of all cancer patients receive radiation. There are 3 types of radiation: external, internal, and systemic. The one you get depends on the type of cancer you have, as well as where the cancer is.

- **External radiation** uses a machine. It sends rays into the tumor from outside your body, only targeting the part of your body affected by cancer.
- With **internal radiation**, a radioactive source goes inside your body near the cancer, either for a short time or permanently depending on the type of cancer.
- **Systemic radiation** comes from a special radioactive medicine. You might take it by mouth or get it through a vein. The medicine then travels throughout your body. Your healthcare provider will tell you about any safety actions you need to take.

Stem cell transplant

This procedure puts healthy stem cells in your body to replace the stem cells affected by cancer or cancer treatment. It's a very complicated process. Your provider will review the risks and benefits if this is the best fit

for you. You might also hear it referred to as a bone marrow transplant.

Immunotherapy

These medicines help train your immune system to find and fight cancer cells. It's a more personalized approach that can work for certain cancers.

Targeted therapy

These medicines attack certain proteins that help cancer cells grow, divide, and spread. It may be available for certain types of cancer.

Clinical trials

New cancer treatments are tested in clinical trials. Ask your healthcare provider if a clinical trial is right for you.

Side effects

While navigating your cancer journey, it's important to understand how treatments might impact your health. Ask about possible side effects and what they mean for you now—and in the future. For instance:

- How will this treatment affect my daily life?
- Will I be able to go to school or hang out with friends?
- What are the short-term vs. long-term side effects of the treatments?
- Will this impact my ability to have children one day?

Remember, it's OK to lean on your parents or guardians for help in asking these questions and making decisions about treatment. But this is your body and your life. Taking an active role can help you feel more in control. If you want to learn more about your type of cancer, treatment options, and resources, visit trusted online sources. The [National Cancer Institute](#) and the [American Cancer Society](#) are both good places to start.

It takes a village

As you start the treatment process, you're going to meet a lot of new faces. Your cancer-fighting team might include a pediatric oncologist (who helps kids and teens like you) or a medical oncologist (who typically works with adults with cancer). You might also see a surgical oncologist (healthcare provider who uses surgery to treat cancer) and a radiation oncologist (provider who uses radiation therapy to treat cancer).

Think of these experts as your co-pilots on your cancer journey. Each one plays a unique role in your treatment. Don't hesitate to talk with them, express your feelings, or even share your fears. They've heard similar things from other young patients like you and can offer encouragement and understanding. They can also connect you with organizations like the [Ullman Foundation](#) and [Teen Cancer America](#), which specialize in supporting teens with cancer. So get to know your treatment team, trust them, and don't be afraid to reach out when you need a helping hand or have questions.

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