Cancer Prevention Trials: Who Can Participate and What They Involve

Even if you haven't been diagnosed with cancer, you can help with cancer research. You may be able to take part in a cancer prevention trial or study.

Unlike clinical research trials, prevention trials involve people who do not have cancer. But participants may be at high risk of cancer. They may also have had cancer in the past and are now at risk of developing a new cancer. Prevention studies aim to find ways to reduce these risks.

Prevention studies have led to important breakthroughs in cancer treatment. Many people enroll in these studies to help with the development of new medicines. By taking part, you may be able to decrease your own risk for getting cancer. Plus, your participation could help future breakthroughs that benefit others.

Before you decide to enroll, it is important to know what a prevention trial involves.

What happens in prevention trials

Generally, a prevention trial will be either an action study or an agent study.

An action study asks the participant to do something. This means that you would take specific actions, such as exercising or eating more of a certain food.

An agent study asks participants to take something. This could be medicines, vitamins, or dietary supplements.

Through prevention trials, researchers hope to answer important medical questions. These might include:

- How safe is it for a person to take this medicine or do this activity?
- What is the correct dose of a new medicine?
- Are there any harmful side effects?
- Is the new approach better at preventing cancer than the traditional approach? (This is the question most prevention trials try to answer.)

You may be worried about taking a medicine that is still in trial. This is a normal concern. Talk with your healthcare provider about the possible risks of taking part in a trial. Also keep in mind that protocols are in place to ensure your safety.

Benefits and risks

Prevention trials have many of the same benefits as clinical trials. By taking part in a prevention trial, you:

- Take an active role in your own future health
- May lower your chances of getting cancer
- Could help others who may get cancer in the future
- Get access to expert healthcare providers

But like a clinical trial, a prevention trial has risks. These include:

- Side effects from medicines or supplements
- Ineffectiveness at lowering your odds of getting cancer
- Costs that are not covered by health insurance

To determine whether participation makes sense for you, discuss these risks and benefits with your provider and the study organizers. You may want to ask questions such as:

- How long will the study last?
- How can this study help me? How can it help others?
- What are possible side effects of the medicines or supplements being used in the study?
- How do I know this study is safe?
- What will I have to do if I take part?
- How could the study change my daily life?
- What will I have to pay for if I take part in this trial?

Ultimately, you know yourself best. Don't feel pressure to join a trial just because your provider tells you it would be a good fit. If you would be uncomfortable taking part, a prevention trial may not be for you. And that's OK. It is your decision if you want to participate.

What to expect

If you decide to join a prevention trial, the first step is to give your informed consent. This means that before you agree to any treatment, you will be told exactly what to expect. You will receive all the facts of the study, including:

- Details about the study's methods
- Information on the tests you may have
- Benefits of the study
- Risks of the study

Don't be afraid to ask questions during this time. It's important that you fully understand what this trial will mean for you. Once you feel ready, you can sign the consent form. But this does not mean you must complete the trial. You can leave the study at any time. Your participation is voluntary.

If you do join the study, you can expect to work with physicians, nurses, and other healthcare providers. Along with any medicine or action you're asked to take, you may also need to keep a diary. You may also have blood tests. It is important to follow the research team's instructions to make sure your results are reliable.

Last, it is important to know that your rights are protected. Any information researchers collect about you will be kept as private as possible. You also have the right to safety in any study. Groups such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) assure this by vetting research before it reaches the trial stage. The IRB must approve the study before people can be enrolled in it. As a result, it is unlikely that a trial will be unsafe.