

8 Tips for Communicating Well with Your Healthcare Provider



A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming and stressful. But a good relationship and open communication with your healthcare provider can make it easier. You and your provider can work together as a team to make sure you get the care that you need. To do that, you need to communicate well with one another. These tips may help:

1. Ask questions

Don't shy away from asking questions. Healthcare providers want you to come to them for information and advice. But you may have limited time during your appointment, so prep beforehand. Write down the questions you want to ask. That way, you won't forget. Let your provider know what your questions are at the start of your visit, so you have time to talk about them. It's also hard to remember everything your provider tells you. You may want to write it down. You can also ask if you can record the conversation. This way, you can listen to it later. You can also ask for a written summary of what you talked about during the visit.

2. Ask for reliable information

Decisions about cancer treatments are not always made in 1 office visit. You'll want time to think things over and do your own research. Ask your provider for written and online resources that can help. These may include websites, national organizations, and government agencies. It's also sometimes easier to understand more about your cancer with visual aids. Ask your provider to explain your imaging tests, such as X-rays, MRI or CT scans, or pathology slides. Or have your provider write down your treatment choices, so you can refer to them after the visit.

3. Make sure you get the answers you need

A cancer diagnosis may seem confusing—and complicated. Providers may use medical language that's hard to understand. We may also forget the information we're given during an office visit or may not remember it correctly. One way to help fix this is to repeat back to your provider what you think they said, in your own words. You can start with, "So you mean I should ...," or "I think you're suggesting" This way, your provider can explain something again if it's not clear. Remember, you can also always call or send a message after your visit and ask to speak with your provider or a nurse again.

4. Be honest with your provider

It may be tough to talk about what you are dealing with when it comes to your cancer. But your provider can't help you unless you share how you feel. Tell your provider about any cultural or religious beliefs that may affect your treatment choices. If you have new or worsening symptoms such as pain, let them know. There may be different treatments you can try. Let your provider know if you plan to try any complementary therapies to help treat cancer symptoms, such as acupuncture or energy healing. They can tell you if it is safe and whether they think it will help. They can also suggest providers you can see. Make sure you give your provider a list of all the medicines, herbs, and supplements that you take, including anything over the counter. Some medicines and supplements can interfere with cancer treatments.

5. Take someone with you to your appointments and treatment

It's always good to have a second set of eyes and ears at your provider visits. So why not take a friend or family member with you? They may be able to think of questions to ask your provider or remember details of symptoms that you may have forgotten. Your loved one can also ask the tough questions you may not be comfortable bringing up. You can also go over the information together after your visit. This helps make sure you both heard and understood the same things. You'll usually need to sign a medical release form that grants your loved one the right to talk about your treatment with your healthcare team. This is to protect your privacy.

6. Decide how much you want to know

To make talking with your provider more comfortable, decide how much you want to know about your cancer. Sometimes, people feel more in control if they know everything about their disease. Others feel overwhelmed when they get too many details at once. Let your provider know when you are feeling overwhelmed with information or when you need more to make a better choice. This way, they can talk with you in the best way possible. Also ask your provider about the risks and benefits for each treatment they recommend. You can then make an informed decision.

7. Encourage communication between your providers

You'll most likely have several different healthcare providers as part of your cancer care team. Each one should know what is happening to you. Make a list of all your healthcare providers' names, specialties, phone numbers, and addresses. Give this information to each person on your list. This will make it easier for them to consult each other, share reports and medical records, and talk about your care. You may have to sign medical releases. These let your providers share information and talk about your case with each other. When you visit 1 healthcare provider, ask if they have talked with your other providers or received their reports.

8. Talk with your healthcare provider about any concerns

When it comes to your health, it's not a 1-way street. You should feel like you and your provider work together to treat your cancer and manage its symptoms. But no relationship is perfect, and problems can happen. Sometimes you and your healthcare provider may have different communication styles. But there are ways to make things easier. Be open and honest with your provider. If you're worried that you don't have enough information to make good decisions, tell them. If you don't understand something, let them know. A good healthcare provider will understand your worries and adjust. A family member or friend may be able to help advocate for you and make communication easier if you have problems. If you still feel unheard or dissatisfied, you may want to talk with the nurse, manager, or social worker about your concerns. You may also choose to get a second opinion or find a new provider. Don't worry that you will hurt your provider's feelings. Just make sure you have a new healthcare provider lined up before you go, so that there are no gaps in your care.

Remember, you are the most important member of your care team. You have the right to:

- Ask questions
- Take an active role in your care
- Participate in all decisions about your treatment

It may seem hard at first, but with practice, it may get easier as you build your relationship with your healthcare providers. In fact, you'll be surprised at how good you'll get at this over time.

Caregiver's tip: Ask your loved one how you can step in and advocate for them. They know best what they need from you.

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