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# CANCER



Caring for a loved one with cancer is no easy task. Physical and emotional care can be time-consuming and exhausting. Not only does it require caring for someone you love at home, but it also means facing your own concerns about the diagnosis and eventual outcome of the disease. Practical concerns, such as worries about financial issues and time management, are also common. The goal of this chapter is to address some of these concerns.

Learning more about cancer can strengthen you in your caregiver role. This can be especially true because of the stigma attached to a cancer diagnosis. The idea of cancer cells growing in your loved one's body may conjure thoughts of being attacked by an unknown force that cannot be controlled.

It can be difficult to learn about a disease when you do not know where to start. This section provides general information about cancer, including what caregivers can do to help their loved ones. For more information on specific cancer types, see the additional resources listed at the end of this section.

## What Is Cancer?

Cancer refers to a group of illnesses that result from cells in the body growing abnormally. These cells divide and produce new cells in an uncontrolled way that can spread throughout the body and cause damage to essential organs.

When cancer spreads to other parts of the body, this is called metastasis. Metastases can occur when cancer cells enter the bloodstream or lymph system. These systems circulate all over the body and allow the cells to travel.

Tumors are masses (or lumps) that can develop as abnormal cells accumulate. Not all tumors are cancer. Benign (non-cancerous or nonmalignant) tumors do not spread to other parts of the body and are rarely life-threatening.

There are four main types of cancer:

- 1 Carcinomas – cancers of the organs
- 2 Sarcomas – cancers of the muscles, bone, cartilage, and connective tissue
- 3 Lymphomas – cancers of the lymphatic system
- 4 Leukemias – cancers of the blood-making system



Cancer cells vary in how fast they grow and how they spread in the body. Most cancers are defined by stage of growth using a system developed by the American Joint Committee on Cancer for solid tumors (like cancer of the lung, breast or colon). The stage is based on the size of the tumor and on how much the cancer has spread.

- s Stage I – Primary tumor only
- s Stage II – Primary tumor, but larger than in Stage I
- s Stage III – Primary tumor and metastasis to lymph nodes
- s Stage IV – Primary tumor and distant metastasis

(Adapted from Dollinger, M., Rosenbaum, E., and Cable, G. Everyone's Guide to Cancer Therapy. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1997)

### Who Gets Cancer?

In the United States, half of all men and one-third of all women will get cancer at some time in their life. This statistic includes skin cancers, most of which are easily treated. Millions of people have cancer today or have had it in the past. It affects all races and age groups, although it is more prevalent in the elderly and in certain geographical regions.

Your family members and friends may wonder if they can "catch" cancer from the patient. The disease is not contagious. It cannot be spread from person to person through the air, by contact or via blood transfusions. Rather, the risk of cancer can be inherited. This means that it can be passed through families from parents to children. This is just one of the risk factors for cancer. These risk factors increase the chance of getting cancer. Reducing them can lessen the risk.

### Cancer risk factors

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- n Tobacco use
- n High fat diet and being overweight
- n Excessive exposure to sunlight
- n Drinking too much alcohol
- n X-rays and other sources of radioactivity
- n Geographic area
- n Chemicals and other substances in the environment (carcinogens)
- n Unsafe sexual practices (through acquiring certain infections, such as HIV or genital warts)
- n Family members who have cancer (certain types of cancer are hereditary)

(Adapted from Dollinger, M., et al., 1997)



## Common Symptoms of Cancer

It is important to know that these symptoms do not mean that the patient has cancer. Only a doctor can make a diagnosis.

### Cancer symptoms

- s Thickening or lump in the body
- s Cough or hoarseness that does not go away
- s Obvious change in a wart or mole
- s Changes in bowel or bladder habits
- s Unexplained bleeding or discharge
- s Any sore that does not heal
- s Unusual upset stomach or difficulty swallowing

### Diagnosing cancer

Doctors use various means to make a diagnosis:

- n Physical examination
- n Laboratory tests – such as blood and urine tests
- n Imaging – x-ray, CT scan, and MRI are examples of imaging
- n Biopsy

When a biopsy is done, tissue is examined directly to see if it has the characteristics of cancer. Tissue is obtained through a needle or a surgical procedure. Biopsy is a good method for diagnosing cancer with certainty.

Waiting for test results can be difficult for patients and their caregivers. This includes initial diagnostic tests and subsequent tests to identify returning or metastasizing (spreading) disease. It is important that both you and your loved one get support from friends and family members at times like this. Using relaxation techniques to relieve stress may also be helpful.

For more information on obtaining support, taking care of yourself and using relaxation techniques, please see the "You Have Needs, Too" section.

## Treatment for Cancer

The good news is that about half of all cancers diagnosed are now curable. Even with cancers that cannot be cured, symptoms are often greatly diminished by treatment. Treatment options, which depend on the stage and type of cancer, include:

- s Surgery
- s Radiation therapy
- s Chemotherapy
- s Biological therapy
- s Hormone therapy



Cancer treatments can be almost as frightening as the disease. You might imagine your loved one being "cut" by surgery, "burned" by radiation, or "poisoned" by chemotherapy. Understanding and learning about treatment options can help you and your loved one feel more secure. It is helpful to talk about your fears with health care practitioners, family members, and friends.

For more information on how and when to effectively communicate with your loved one's health care team, please see the "Navigating 'The System'" section.

### **Surgery**

About 60% of people with cancer have some sort of surgery. If the tumor is in one place and can be removed without interfering with body functions, then surgery may be the best approach.

### **Radiation therapy**

Radiation therapy is done to shrink tumors or to make them disappear. This can be done by directing beams of x-rays or other high-energy rays at the tumor site. Radioactive materials can also be placed in or near the tumor.

Receiving radiation therapy is generally not painful but side effects can sometimes occur.

### **Radiation Side Effects**

- n Fatigue or tiredness
- n Nausea and vomiting
- n Skin inflammation
- n Appetite loss
- n Dry mouth
- n Changes in sense of taste

### **Chemotherapy**

Radiation and surgery are often used to treat cancer that is in one part of the body. Chemotherapy may be used to treat cancer that has spread. Treatment can also be a combination of surgery, radiation and/or chemotherapy. Some chemotherapy chemicals can be taken by mouth, others need to be taken intravenously (into the blood through a vein). Chemotherapy can sometimes cause unpleasant side effects.



## Chemotherapy Side Effects

- s Nausea and vomiting
- s Fatigue or tiredness
- s Appetite loss
- s Hair loss
- s Sore mouth
- s Changes in taste
- s Fever and infection

Be aware of the side effects of radiation and chemotherapy treatment. You can help reduce and prevent them. You can also help by knowing when to contact the health care team.

For more information on how and when to effectively communicate with the health care team, please see the "Navigating 'The System'" section.

## Biological therapy

Biological therapy uses treatments that help the immune system do its job of fighting disease in our bodies. This can be an effective treatment for some cancers.

## Hormone therapy

For cancers that need hormones to grow, hormonal therapy can be an option. With this therapy, the production of hormones is reduced through surgery or medication.



## Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that evaluate new treatments. Those who take part in clinical trials are some of the first to receive and benefit from new approaches to cancer therapy. These treatments have usually been tested with good results. Patients in trials are watched closely by physicians and researchers. For more information on how clinical trials and cancer research might benefit your loved one, contact the National Cancer Institute (see resource information at the end of this section).

## Complementary or alternative therapy

Complementary and alternative therapies are treatments that do not use known cancer drugs, or use approaches not common in the medical community. Some (such as relaxation, visualization, and acupuncture) are so commonly used to control symptoms, that they are really mainstream approaches. It is important to research and understand the risks and benefits of these therapies. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) Clearinghouse (listed with the resources at the end of this section) is a good source of information.

## What You Can Do to Help

- n Notify your medical practitioner at the first sign of fever or infection.
- n Ask the patient's medical team about medication for nausea and vomiting.
- n With nausea, feed the patient as if he/she had the flu:
  - ▼ Avoid fatty, fried, or spicy foods.
  - ▼ Prepare food for the patient when you can.
  - ▼ Serve food at room temperature or cold.
- n Help keep your loved one's mouth clean; brush teeth at least twice a day.
- n Encourage the use of relaxation techniques to relieve stress and decrease nausea.
- n Distract the patient with activities he/she enjoys to decrease nausea.
- n Make sure your loved one gets plenty of rest.
- n Consider obtaining a wig for the patient before hair starts to fall out.
- n Remind your loved one that most side effects are not permanent.
- n Help rate and record the patient's fatigue in a journal.

For more information on how to treat fatigue (including keeping a fatigue journal), nausea, vomiting, or skin problems, please see the "Symptom Management at Home" section of this directory. For more information on relaxation techniques, see the "You Have Needs, Too" section.

## Pain Management

Your loved one may experience pain related to the cancer, treatment, or other unrelated reasons. Cancer can cause pain as it spreads into soft tissue and bone, or presses onto nerves. Muscle spasms, constipation, and bedsores can also cause pain. You can help by making sure that the patient receives proper treatment for pain when it occurs.

### How You Can Help Obtain Treatment for Pain

- s Find medical practitioners who understand cancer pain.
- s Ensure regular visits to cancer pain specialists.
- s Ask questions of doctors and discuss your concerns.
- s Administer pain medication as prescribed.
- s Offer to massage sore or painful areas, if the physician approves.
- s Encourage the use of relaxation techniques to relieve stress and decrease pain.
- s Find ways to avoid and manage stress in the household.
- s Distract your loved one with activities he/she enjoys.
- s Watch for signs of pain or other discomfort.
- s Help the patient rate and record his/her pain in a daily pain journal.
- s Contact your loved one's medical practitioner if pain is not relieved by medication.

Please see the "Symptom Management at Home" section for other information on pain. This includes facts and myths about pain medication as well as details on a daily pain journal. For more information on relaxation techniques, see the "You Have Needs, Too" section of this directory.

## HELPFUL CANCER RESOURCES

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### Organizations

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#### n National Cancer Institute

Public Inquiries Office

Building 31, Room 10A31

31 Center Drive, MSC 2580

Bethesda, MD 20892-2580

(301) 435-3848

(800) 4-CANCER (800-422-6237)

[http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov/wyntk\\_pubs/cancer.htm](http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov/wyntk_pubs/cancer.htm)

- This is the primary National Institutes of Health organization for research on cancer.

#### n Cancer Information Service (CIS)

Toll-free: (800) 4-CANCER (800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers):

(800) 332-8615

- This is a program of the National Cancer Institute that provides excellent, up-to-date, and easy to understand information on cancer and cancer research. The information is provided free of charge in both English and Spanish.

#### n American Cancer Society

(800) ACS-2345

<http://www.cancer.org/>

- This organization provides a Website with comprehensive information on many types of cancer, day-to-day living concerns, and treatment options. It includes a state-of-

the-art cancer profiler, a decision support tool that helps patients make informed decisions about their treatment. The site provides excellent caregiver information (from the home page, click on Living with Cancer and then on Coping with Cancer). The organization also offers other services via their toll free number, including free wigs and some financial support.

#### n Cancer Care, Inc – National Office

275 7th Ave

New York, NY 10001

Services: (212) 302-2400

Toll free counseling line: (800) 813-HOPE (4673)

Email: [info@cancercare.org](mailto:info@cancercare.org)

<http://www.cancercare.org/>

- This is one of the few organizations offering financial support to cancer patients. Other services provided include an online database of cancer resources, educational workshops, counseling, and support groups.

#### n National Center for Complementary and Alternative

Medicine (NCCAM) Clearinghouse

P.O. Box 8218

Silver Spring, MD 20907-8218

Toll Free: (888) 644-6226

TTY/TDY: (888) 644-6226

FAX: (301) 495-4957

<http://nccam.nih.gov/>

- This is the National Institutes of Health organization dedicated to exploring complementary and alternative healing practices.

## Websites

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n MEDLINEplus Health Information

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cancergeneral.html>

- MEDLINE is a service of the National Library of Medicine that provides excellent links to Websites for a variety of topics related to cancer.

n Cancer Net (a service of the National Cancer Institute)

<http://www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov/>

- An excellent resource, this site is your gateway to the most recent and accurate cancer information from the National Cancer Institute.

n OncoLink

<http://www.oncolink.upenn.edu/>

- This is a comprehensive cancer support Website that offers medical information, including information on symptom management; psychosocial information, including information on support groups and extensive caregiver resources; and recommendations from cancer experts for books about cancer.

n CanSearch

<http://www.cansearch.org/canserch/canserch.htm>

- The purpose of CanSearch is to use a step-by-step process to assist online users in finding Internet cancer resources.

## Español/Spanish Information

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n PDQ-Sobre Cuidado Médico-Pacientes: Cese del Hábito de Fumar y Riesgo Persistente en el Paciente de Cáncer (National Cancer Institute)

[http://www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov/clinpdq/supportive\\_pt\\_span2/510203.html](http://www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov/clinpdq/supportive_pt_span2/510203.html)

n ¿Qué es el Cáncer? (American Cancer Society)

[http://www3.cancer.org/cancerinfo/load\\_cont.asp?ct=1&doc=63&Language=SPANISH](http://www3.cancer.org/cancerinfo/load_cont.asp?ct=1&doc=63&Language=SPANISH)

n Control del Dolor Causado por el Cáncer (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)

<http://hstat.nlm.nih.gov/ftrs/pick?collect=ahcpr&dbName=caps&cd=1&t=981993397>

