

## Communication with Health Care Professionals

### **Why is it important to communicate with your health care professionals?**

Almost everyone feels better and more in control of their treatment when they understand why it is being given, as well as side effects that may happen. However, many people have a difficult time talking with their doctor or nurse. Some feel uncomfortable asking questions or talking about their illness and treatment because they're afraid they might look foolish or ask a silly question.

Others may have difficulty because they see their doctor or nurse as a powerful person. Some are afraid if they report too many things, their treatment will stop.

You will need a great deal of information to be informed and make decisions. Some of this information is complicated, and often it must come from different sources. Many people have difficulty getting the information they need.

### **How do I talk with my doctor and nurse to get the information I need?**

It is reasonable to assume the medical staff want to help you and would like to give you the information you need.

- Buy a notebook and write down all the questions you want to ask. Include any symptoms you've been experiencing and how they are impacting your daily activities.
- Bring a friend or family member to your appointment to take notes or help you ask questions.
- Speak frankly with your doctor. Express your feelings, let others know how you feel.
- Take notes during the appointment and ask permission to tape record the visit so you can use it as a reminder at home.

### **What should I tell my doctor and nurse?**

- Tell them about any problems. Examples are:
  - Symptoms to report: how often throughout the day/week they occur, what makes it worse or better. What you are doing for symptom relief.
  - Symptoms to report: how severe (0-10 scale; 0 no symptom to 10 worst imaginable symptom).
  - Physical functioning problems on a 0-10 scale, what makes it worse or better.
  - Emotional problems, such as anger, sadness or anxiety.

- Financial problems because of your cancer or cancer treatment.
  - Problems with doing your daily activities.
  - Need for assistance with physical function or managing symptoms.
  - When you have questions about what is happening to you.
  - When you have decisions to make.
- Repeat what you understand about your cancer or cancer treatment and ask if what you said is correct.
  - Ask your doctor to repeat anything you don't understand.
  - Tell your doctor or nurse when you are not happy.
  - Appreciate what your doctor is doing to help you and tell him/her from time to time.

### **What should I know about my cancer and treatment?**

People should have all the information they need to provide the best possible care at home.

There are many kinds of information that you need:

- An understanding of your diagnosis and stage of disease.
- What medicines are involved in your treatment.
- Side effects to expect from treatment.
- How to best keep track of treatment and side effects.
- How long you will be on treatment.
- How you might expect to respond to treatment.
- Risks and benefits of treatment.
- Other treatment that might be available.
- When you should call your doctor or nurse.
- Where you can go to get more information.
- Where you can get support.
- Understand that not all questions have answers.

### **How do I call my doctor?**

If you feel the situation is an emergency or urgent and you cannot get the information you need, then call the doctor or an emergency room. To do this, use the word "emergency" in your question, and then be persistent until you have the information you need.

Here are some examples of phrasing you might use:

- *I have an emergency (or urgent need) and wish to talk to a doctor.*
- *I have a question about \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm not sure if this is really an emergency. Who can help me?*
- *I'm very concerned about \_\_\_\_\_. I think it is urgent.*

**There are five things you can do to improve your ability to get information you need. The following order is recommended.**

1. Be sure your questions are phrased clearly and specifically.
2. Be sure you know whom you need to reach and how to reach them.
3. Learn who can answer your questions.
4. Ask the questions yourself.
5. Make a log or write questions down and bring to appointment.

**Be sure your statements or questions are phrased clearly.**

Know exactly what information you need.

Example: *"My pain medication is not effective."*

Example: *"My pain is at level \_\_\_\_." (0 = none to 10 = worst it could be)*

Focus your attention on what is most important.

Say the reason you are concerned.

Get to your question immediately.

Write out your questions and check them with other people.

Keep a list of questions you want to ask at the next doctor visit.

Writing down your questions beforehand is one of the best ways to be sure you are being clear.

If you get flustered, which happens to many people, then you can read your questions.

Learn which staff members give different kinds of information to people with cancer.

Example: *"Who can tell me when my husband will be discharged?"*

**What could prevent you from carrying out your plan to improve your ability to get information you need?**

No questions are stupid.

Some people feel that medical staff members are so important or so busy that they should not take up their valuable time with questions.

This is not so! Medical staff members are there to help people with sharing information and answering questions.

Do not feel intimidated. You have a right to the information.

Think of other obstacles that could interfere with carrying out your plan.

**Where can I get more information?**

- Call the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship at: 1-888-YES-NCSS or visit on the internet at: <http://www.canceradvocacy.org/>. Click on Toolbox.
- Call the National Cancer Institute at: 1-800-4-CANCER or visit on the internet at: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/>. Click on Coping with Cancer.
- Call the American Cancer Society at: 1-800-ACS-2345 or visit on the internet at: <http://www.cancer.org>.
- Visit the Family Care Research Program at: <http://www.cancercare.msu.edu>.

**References:**

- National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship: Cancer survivor toolbox at: <http://www.canceradvocacy.org>. Click on Toolbox.