

# Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



## Confronting a Cancer Diagnosis: Steps to Consider

*By the National Cancer Institute*

There are few things more unsettling than sitting in front of a doctor and hearing the words, “you have cancer.” Whether you have already experienced that conversation, or you know someone who has, those difficult words can leave one in an emotional place that is unlike anything else. How would you handle such news? What if you are with a loved one or a friend when they get that diagnosis? What does a cancer diagnosis mean, and what should the next step be?

Although the National Cancer Institute’s (NCI) primary mission is to conduct, support, and coordinate cancer research, it also has a role in collecting and disseminating information about cancer. In that role, NCI serves as a source of important information for patients and their family and friends, including information about how to communicate with their health care providers. Many people have never spoken with a health care professional about cancer, and knowing what to do and who to talk with from the start may be critical in getting the best possible treatment and outcome.

For many African Americans, a serious disease like cancer can be a shared family experience. It is not uncommon for family members to rally around a cancer patient. Family or friends can assume various roles in gathering information and in helping make decisions. These tasks include learning about the specific cancer type that has been diagnosed, selecting a physician, getting a second opinion, assessing insurance coverage, and identifying a place to receive treatment.

Here are some important things to consider when confronting cancer:

**Learn about the disease and treatment options.** The first thing to do is to educate yourself as much as possible about the type of cancer you have been diagnosed with as well as possible treatment approaches. You can do this any number of ways, starting with talking to your doctor. Information is also available through NCI. You can begin with the NCI web site, [cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov) ([cancer.gov/espanol](http://cancer.gov/espanol)). You can also call the NCI’s toll-free Cancer Information Service, 1-800-4-CANCER and speak to a specialist who can answer your questions about cancer and also direct you to additional information, including publications.

**Learn about which physicians treat cancer patients.** Most physicians who treat people with cancer are medical doctors (they have an M.D. degree) or osteopathic doctors (they have a

D.O. degree). These doctors often have advanced training in a specialty or a subspecialty. For example, medical oncologists are internal medicine doctors who manage the treatment regimen of cancer patients, and hematologists are internal medicine doctors who focus on diseases of the blood and related tissues. Radiation oncologists use radiation to treat cancer, and surgeons perform operations.

**Find a doctor.** Most people will get a referral from their primary care physician, but you can also consult a local hospital or cancer center, or access a list of specialists from local or national medical societies. Friends and family can also help you identify a doctor, especially if they have already dealt with cancer.

**Ask questions.** There are some basic questions you can ask your doctor before your treatment begins. Shock and stress after the diagnosis can make it hard to think of everything you want to ask the doctor. It often helps to make a list of questions before the appointment. To help remember what the doctor says, you may want to take notes or ask whether you may use a tape recorder. Some people want to have a family member or a friend with them when they talk to the doctor—to take part in the discussion, to take notes, or just to listen. You do not have to ask all of your questions at once. Suggested questions are available in the NCI publication, *What You Need to Know About Cancer*, available on cancer.gov (cancer.gov/espanol).

**After consulting a doctor to learn about the disease and recommended treatments, consider obtaining a second opinion.** Sometimes people worry about this. They are afraid it may seem like they don't trust their first doctor. Not at all. What they are doing is seeking an additional evaluation of their medical condition from another professional. It is quite common to seek a second opinion, and most physicians welcome another doctor's views. Your health care plan may even require that you get a second opinion. In fact, your doctor may be able to recommend a specialist for this consultation.

Finally, when confronted with a cancer diagnosis (whether your own or that of someone you love), just remember to collect yourself and take a deep breath. Most times, you don't need to rush to make a decision. You will make the best decisions if you give yourself the chance to get the best information you can. You can trust that the information you receive from NCI is up-to-date and accurate. So, if you want to find the facts for a loved one or for yourself, turn to NCI today.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).*