Preparing for Cancer Treatment

Learn how to prepare yourself and your loved ones for your cancer treatment.

Soon after you are diagnosed with cancer, you and your doctor will discuss various treatment options. As you decide what course of treatment is right for you, you may feel as if you’ve lost control of your body and your life. It’s normal to feel anxious and stressed at this time. However, you may find it easier to handle the physical and emotional aspects of your treatment if you take an active role in preparing for it.

Ask questions

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed by the news that you have cancer and what will happen during your treatment. Don’t hesitate to talk to your doctor about any and all of the questions and concerns you have. If something is on your mind, it’s worth asking about. By getting answers to your questions, you can become a more active participant in your care.

Before visiting your doctor, you may find it useful to write down your questions so that you won’t forget what you want to ask during the appointment. The American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute offer useful tools to help you organize your thoughts and questions before your visit. To help you remember what your doctor says, take notes or ask whether you may use a tape recorder.

You may also want to ask a family member or friend to join you when you talk to your doctor. This person can provide emotional support and help you remember what is said during the visit.

Know which side effects you may experience and plan how you will deal with them

The most common cancer treatments are chemotherapy (using drugs to kill cancer cells), radiotherapy (using radiation to kill cancer cells), surgery and biological therapy (using proteins to boost your immune system). Chemotherapy and radiotherapy kill cancer cells, but some healthy cells can also become damaged in the process. That is what causes the side effects of cancer treatment, such as fatigue, hair loss, nausea, fever and infection.

You won’t know exactly what side effects you will experience until you begin your treatment. One way to prepare is to ask your doctor about your chances of having side effects and what they might be. Planning ways to deal with possible side effects can help you feel more in control of your situation. In addition, having a positive attitude, talking about your feelings and learning as much as you can about your cancer and treatment may help you feel less anxious about side effects. Keep in mind that most side effects of cancer treatment can be controlled and will go away after treatment ends.

Eat right

Normally, a healthy diet includes eating lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and a moderate amount of low-fat meat and dairy products, as well as limiting fat and sugar. However, nutrition recommendations for people preparing for cancer treatment are different. They are designed to make your body strong enough to handle the effects of your cancer and treatment.
For this reason, you may need to increase the amount of calories and protein you eat. For example, you may need to include more milk, cheese and cooked eggs in your diet. You may also need to change your cooking methods. Your doctor can provide specific recommendations on how you should change your diet before and during treatment, or he or she may refer you to a dietitian. Appropriate nutrition is very important for people who are being treated for cancer, and a dietitian can offer valuable information and advice.

Ask your doctor to help you plan meals that won’t contribute to certain treatment side effects, such as constipation or nausea. Then, before you start your treatment, stock up on foods that are part of your meal plan so you won’t need to shop as often. In addition, you or a friend or family member may decide to cook in advance and freeze foods in meal-sized portions to make things easier during your treatment.

Get help from family and friends

During your cancer treatment, you may need help with tasks you’re used to doing on your own. It’s a good idea to discuss your changing needs with family members and friends before your treatment begins so that you’ll have a plan in place. For example, someone may need to temporarily take over household jobs like cooking, mowing the lawn, doing laundry or washing the car. Everyone involved should discuss the changes that need to be made in your family’s routine. It’s important that everyone agrees to and is comfortable with the new routine.

Think about your work schedule

Whether or not you can continue working during your cancer treatment will depend on your health status and how you feel during treatment. If your treatment makes you very tired or causes troublesome side effects, you might consider adjusting your work schedule for a while. Although you won’t know what adjustments are necessary until your treatment begins, it may be useful to consider the possibilities in advance.

Find a support group

Being diagnosed with cancer and going through treatment is a difficult experience that can leave you feeling overwhelmed, frightened and alone. Even with the support of family members and friends, many people need additional help dealing with the emotional and physical impact of having cancer. A support group can provide this help. Support groups are designed to offer an atmosphere where you can talk about your feelings and share information with other people who are going through a similar experience. Support groups are also available to the family members of people who have cancer.

Many different types of support groups are available. It’s important to find one that makes you feel comfortable and meets your individual needs. Your doctor or a local hospital can suggest ways to find a support group, or you may contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society (check the phone book). The National Cancer Institute is another resource for support group information. A growing number of social media resources provide services for people who have cancer to more easily get help and support from others. Online tools and phone apps are available to help cancer patients manage information about their care, give status updates and organize help from volunteers such as family, friends and others in the community.