

10 Questions to Ask After Cancer Diagnosis

It's the diagnosis everyone dreads: You have cancer. But if you find yourself in this position, getting the answers to 10 key questions can help you mobilize your efforts and figure out the best treatment options, notes Bavesb Balar, M.D., a board-certified hematologist and oncologist on staff at CentraState Medical Center in Freehold, N.J.

In an advice column for the *LiveScience* website, Dr. Balar notes that remarkable strides have been made over the past 20 years in treating cancer, but more than 1 million people in the United States are still diagnosed every year. Nearly half that many die from cancer-related conditions.

As devastating as a cancer diagnosis can be, it's important to understand some basic facts about the diagnosis in order to begin moving forward with a treatment program and "prepare for battle," he says.

With that in mind, Dr. Balar recommends 10 questions every cancer patient or family member should ask the treating doctor:

1. Is the kind of cancer I have treatable? Any and all cancer discussions should begin with this question, so you have a clear understanding of your prognosis.

2. What kind of cancer do I have? Where is it located? Has it spread? Your treatment plan will be based upon this information, whether it involves surgery, chemotherapy, medication, radiation or other therapy, as well as recovery.

3. What stage is my cancer? Staging is a key marker to determine how advanced the disease has become, which will in turn help guide treatment. Staging ranges from 0 to stage 4,

based on the size of the tumor, lymph node involvement, and whether the cancer has spread from its original location to other places in the body. The stage is determined after the tumor and lymph nodes are removed and examined by a pathologist.

4. Should I take or continue using supplements (vitamins, etc.)? The answer depends on what kind of cancer you have and your treatment plan. Many people take supplements to boost their immune system, health and nutrition. But it's important to recognize that some supplements can lessen the effectiveness of certain cancer treatments, so you should discuss any you may be taking with your doctor. Also, be aware that it's also important for cancer patients to consume high-quality food.

5. Will I be in pain? What medications can ease the discomfort? Many cancer patients experience pain from the disease and certain therapies. Cancer treatments can lessen or alleviate pain, but pain-management specialists can also suggest ways to minimize discomfort for patients undergoing therapy.

6. When should I tell my family and friends? This is really up to you. It is a very personal preference. Dr. Balar recommends telling closest family members (spouses, siblings) before talking with others. An oncologist can also be part of the conversation with the family to address questions and concerns.

7. What is the standard treatment for the cancer I have, and are there downsides? It's important to understand the benefits, risks and any potential side effects of treatment. Sometimes, there are choices you can make in how to attack the cancer. Some treatment plans are more aggressive than others, and most therapies have at least some side effects you should know about.

8. Can you recommend colleagues for a second opinion? It's a good idea to have at least two medical opinions about how to treat your cancer. That's the best way to determine whatever choice you make is the best one and is informed by more than a single person.

9. How will cancer treatment affect my daily life? Cancer treatment can be difficult and even debilitating to some degree, so you should have an understanding of what lies ahead. It may be comforting to know that work, social lives, and even physical activity can continue, in some capacity, during treatment.

10. What cancer support services are available? Support from friends and family members are key to assisting patients with the physical, emotional and financial impacts of cancer. But some professional services, including palliative care, can also help lighten the responsibilities and lessen stress for everyone involved.

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