12. Making Decisions about Treatment

Sometimes it is difficult to decide on the right treatment. You may feel everything is happening so fast that you don’t have time to think things through. However, there is usually time to consider what sort of treatment you want.

Waiting for test results and for treatment to begin can be difficult. Some people feel overwhelmed by information, while others want as much information as they can find. Either way, making sure you understand enough about your illness, the treatment options and side effects will help you make your own decisions.

If offered a choice of treatments, you will need to weigh up their advantages and disadvantages. Consider how important any side effects are to you, particularly those that affect your lifestyle. In this situation, it may help to contact a lung cancer nurse or see a hospital social worker for help and support. If you have a partner, you may want to talk with them about your treatment options. You can also talk to friends and family.

If only one type of treatment is recommended, ask your doctor to explain why other treatment choices have not been offered.

Some people with more advanced cancer will choose treatment, even if it offers only a small chance of cure. Others may refuse treatment if the side effects outweigh the benefits so that they retain the best possible quality of life. Another option people choose is to receive treatment that while not curing the cancer will make them feel as well as possible for as long as possible. Always remember that you have the right to accept or refuse any treatment.

Talking with doctors

When your doctor first tells you that you have cancer, it’s very stressful and you may not remember many details about what you’re told. You may want to see the doctor several times before deciding on treatment.

If your doctor uses medical terms you don’t understand, it’s okay to ask for a simpler explanation. You also can check the meaning of words in the Glossary (see page 69).

Before seeing your doctor, it may help to write down your questions (see page 68 for a list of example questions for your doctor). Taking notes or recording the discussion can help too. Many people like to have a family member or friend with them to take part in the discussion with their doctor, to take notes or simply to listen.

A second opinion

For some people, it’s important to speak to more than one doctor regarding their diagnosis and recommended treatment plan. You can get a second opinion even if you have started treatment or still want to be treated by your first doctor.

Speak to your doctor if you would like a second opinion. They are used to such requests and can refer you to another specialist as well as send your initial results to that person.

In a situation where the second specialist provides an opinion that differs from your initial doctor, you may wish to seek a third opinion or discuss the differing opinions with other members of your multidisciplinary team. Ultimately, it will be your decision as to which specialist’s opinion you feel is right for you.
12. Making Decisions about Treatment

Question checklist
You may find this checklist helpful when thinking about the questions you want to ask your doctor about your illness and treatment. If your doctor gives you answers that you don’t understand you can ask for clarification.

- What type of lung cancer do I have?
- How extensive is my cancer?
- What treatment do you recommend and why?
- Are the latest tests and treatments for my type of cancer available in this hospital?
- Are there other treatment choices for me? If not, why not?
- What are the risks and possible side effects of each treatment?
- How long will treatment take? How much will it affect what I can do? How much will it cost?
- Will I have to stay in hospital?
- Will the treatment affect my sex life?
- Would palliative care be useful for me?
- Are there any complementary therapies that might help me?
- Are there any clinical trials of new treatments for my type of lung cancer?
- How frequently will I have check-ups?

If you have several questions for your doctor, you may want to book a longer appointment.

End-of-life decision making
While your health care professionals will do everything they can to cure your lung cancer, factors such as the stage of the cancer at diagnosis, sometimes mean that their best efforts cannot achieve a cure. For some people with advanced lung cancer, treatment can keep the disease under control for months or years without curing it. Treatment also can help control symptoms such as pain to make life more comfortable.

Your right to stop treatment
Some people with advanced cancer decide to stop cancer treatment and choose to have palliative care instead. This is a personal decision that you need to communicate to your family and health professionals.

In legal terms, if you want to refuse medical treatment, you must fully understand the nature of the treatment proposed and the consequences of not having treatment. You can refuse each treatment separately; you don’t have to accept treatment on an all-or-nothing basis.

You can complete a refusal of medical treatment certificate outlining your wishes that your doctors must follow.
12. Making Decisions about Treatment

Your right to keep trying
It’s your right to request that treatment continues. Keep in mind that your doctor also has a right to refuse to keep treating you if the treatment will do more harm than good.

You may want to get a second opinion to explore your options. Again, it’s important to communicate your wishes clearly to your family and carers so they can support you.

Making your wishes clear
Many people who have cancer think about what type of medical care they want to receive at the end-of-life. It’s important to write down what you want, in case you become incapacitated. You may create an Advance Health Care Directive and/or an Enduring Power of Attorney. Your doctor can consult these documents rather than speak to your next of kin (see Chapter 13 for more information).

Chapter Summary

▶ Take the time to consider the type of treatment you want. To make an informed decision, you will need to understand enough about your illness, the treatment options and the side effects.

▶ Talk about your treatment options with your GP and/or your medical team. It can help to make a list of questions before meeting with them and to take a family member or friend.

▶ A second opinion from another specialist may be beneficial for you. Your doctor can refer you to another specialist.

▶ If your cancer is incurable, there may be treatments to control the disease as well as the symptoms. You have the right to either refuse medical treatment or request treatment to continue.

▶ Help make your ‘end-of-life’ care wishes clear with an Advance Health Care Directive and/or Enduring Power of Attorney.