Questions to Ask about Cancer

Let's Make Cancer History
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This booklet was first adapted from the 1997 workbook for women with breast cancer developed by the Atlantic Breast Cancer Information Project, in cooperation with the BC/Yukon Breast Cancer Information Project, Breast Cancer InfoLink-Prairies/NWT, Ontario Breast Cancer Information Exchange Project and the Quebec Breast Cancer Information Exchange Network. We have since modified it for people with all types of cancer.
**Communicating with your healthcare team**

Teamwork is needed to treat cancer. Many different healthcare professionals – such as doctors, nurses, social workers, pharmacists and physiotherapists – will help you throughout your experience, and many others will be there for you if you need them.

Your team of healthcare professionals knows about many different aspects of cancer, but they won’t know that you need help if you don’t ask for it. Don’t be afraid, embarrassed or hesitant to ask for exactly what you need from your team.

You are the most important member of your healthcare team. Your situation is unique, and your treatment is developed just for you. You can participate in your care by doing the following:

- Be involved in decisions that affect you.
- Learn about cancer and your treatments in a way that feels right for you.
- Talk to your team about your worries or concerns.
- Go to all your doctor, clinic and hospital appointments.
- Write down questions to ask your team so you won’t forget them at your next appointment.
- Ask your team how to contact them between appointments if you have any questions that need answers quickly.

If your doctor won’t listen to you or answer your questions, you have the right to ask for a second opinion. If that doesn’t work, you can change doctors and look for one who is more willing to answer your questions.
1. What type of cancer do I have?

2. What can be done to treat the cancer?

3. What tests can be done to find out if the cancer has spread? When will I have them?

4. What are lymph nodes and what do they do? Which lymph nodes might be affected by the cancer?

5. Do I need to decide on my treatment right away, or can I think about it and get more information?

6. This is such a big decision. How do I get a second opinion?

7. What is the chance that the cancer will come back after treatment?

8. How can I get in touch with others who have had the same cancer? Is there a support group I can join or a support program you can tell me about?

9. Where can I get more information about this type of cancer?

10. What are clinical trials? How can I find out about clinical trials in my area?

11. What if I choose not to have treatment?

12. Will treatment affect my fertility?
1. What are my options for removing the cancer?

2. Given my situation, which surgery do you recommend? Why? What is the name of the operation I will have?

3. Is there anything I need to do to prepare for the surgery?

4. Will you remove any lymph nodes? If so, why? Is sentinel lymph node biopsy an option for me?

5. If lymph nodes are removed, what side effects might I have?

6. Where will my scar be? What will it look like?

7. Will I need to be in the hospital? If yes, for how long?

8. Will surgery affect my usual activities? If so, for how long?

9. Will I need to take time off work? How much?

10. What are the possible side effects? How are they usually managed?

11. Are there any possible long-term effects?

12. Will I need nursing care at home? What community resources are there to help me after surgery?

13. Will I need more treatment after surgery? If yes, what kind?

14. Will I need reconstruction? Do I need to make decisions about reconstructive surgery now?
1. How big is the **tumour**?

2. What **stage** is the cancer? What does that mean?

3. How many lymph nodes were removed? Did any of them show cancer?

4. Has the cancer spread anywhere else?

5. What is the **grade** of the cancer? How fast is it growing?

6. What are the chances that the cancer will come back after treatment?
Physical recovery from surgery

1. Will I have pain or discomfort after surgery? How long will it last? How can it be managed?

2. How long will it take for the incision to heal? What is the best way to care for my incision? Will I need to have any stitches or staples removed?

3. If I have a drain, how long will it be in place? How should I care for it?

4. What symptoms – swelling, fever, nausea and so on – might be a sign of a problem? Who do I call if I have concerns between appointments?

5. How long after surgery until my follow-up appointment? How often will I see a doctor after surgery?

6. What types of activity should I avoid? For how long?

7. Are there any special exercises I can do to help my recovery? Will I need physiotherapy?

8. Will I need help at home? Who should I talk to about getting help for daily activities such as bathing, cooking and housecleaning?

9. What is lymphedema? Am I at risk of developing it? What can I do to try to avoid it?

10. What should I do if I get lymphedema?
1. What is chemotherapy?

2. What is radiation therapy?

3. Will chemotherapy or radiation therapy improve my chances of survival? How?

4. What are the short-term and long-term effects of these treatments?

5. Will I have treatment before or after surgery? How long before or after surgery will I start treatment?

6. Are there any other non-surgical treatments for the type of cancer I have?
Radiation therapy

1. Do I need radiation therapy? How will it help me?
2. What are the benefits and risks of radiation therapy?
3. What type will I be given?
4. What is radiation therapy like? Will it hurt?
5. How will the radiation therapy be given? How often will it be given? How long will each treatment take?
6. Will I need to be in the hospital? If so, for how long?
7. Where will the treatment be done, and who will give it to me?
8. What are the possible side effects? How are they usually managed?
9. Are there any side effects that I should report right away? Who do I call?
10. Should I do anything in particular before treatments, such as not eat?
11. Are there any special instructions to follow while I am receiving radiation therapy or after the treatment is finished?
12. What do I need to know about taking care of my skin during treatment? Is it okay to use perfume, deodorant or lotions?
13. How long will it take for the treatment area to heal?
14. Will radiation therapy affect my usual activities? If so, for how long?
15. Will I need help with daily activities during treatment?
16. Will I need to take time off work or adjust my work schedule?
17. Will I have to pay for any of the treatment?
1. Do I need chemotherapy? How will it help me?

2. What are the benefits and risks of chemotherapy?

3. How many drugs will I be taking at one time? What is the name of the chemotherapy? What are the names of the drugs?

4. How will the chemotherapy be given? How often will it be given? Over what period of time?

5. Will I need to be in the hospital? If so, for how long?

6. Where will the chemotherapy treatment be done, and who will give it to me?

7. What are the possible side effects? When would they start, and how are they usually managed?

8. Are there any side effects that I should report right away? Who do I call?

9. Are there any possible long-term effects? How are they managed?

10. Will I gain or lose weight?

11. Will I lose my hair? If so, how soon? Where can I find a wig, hairpiece or head covering? Is it covered by health insurance?

12. Are there special instructions to follow while I’m having chemotherapy or after the treatment is finished?

13. Will chemotherapy affect my usual activities? If so, for how long?

14. Will I need help with daily activities during treatment?

15. Will I need to take time off work or adjust my work schedule?

16. Will I have to pay for any of the treatment?
1. What is hormonal therapy?
2. Will I need hormonal therapy?
3. What are the benefits and risks of hormonal therapy?
4. What type of hormonal therapy will I be given? If it is a drug, what is the name of the drug?
5. How will it be given? How often? Over what period of time?
6. What are the possible side effects? How are they managed?
7. What side effects should I report right away? Who do I call?
8. Are there any possible long-term effects? How are they managed?
9. Will I gain or lose weight?
10. Are there things I should or shouldn’t do while having this treatment?
11. Will hormonal therapy affect my usual activities? If so, for how long?
12. Will I have to pay for any of the treatment?
2. Biological therapy

1. What is biological therapy?

2. Will I need biological therapy?

3. What are the benefits and risks of biological therapy?

4. What type of biological therapy will I be given? What is the name of the drug?

5. How will it be given? How often? Over what period of time?

6. What are the possible side effects? How are they managed?

7. What side effects should I report right away? Who do I call?

8. Are there any possible long-term effects? How are they managed?

9. Are there things I should do or shouldn’t do while having this treatment?

10. Will biological therapy affect my usual activities? If so, for how long?

11. Will I have to pay for any of the treatment?
Complementary and alternative therapies

1. What is a complementary therapy? What is an alternative therapy?

2. Would complementary therapies help me cope? Where can I find these? Is there one in particular you suggest?

3. When would it be safe for me to use this therapy with my conventional cancer treatment?

4. What is a safe amount of this therapy?

5. Are there any known risks or benefits in using this therapy?

6. Will you help me track both the benefits and side effects of the therapy?

7. Do you have any suggestions about other complementary therapies that could be helpful for my type of cancer?

8. Will I have to pay for any of the treatment?
1. What is reconstruction? Will I need it?

2. What types of reconstructive surgery are available to me?

3. What is the name of the operation that is recommended for me? Can you explain the procedure?

4. What are the benefits and risks of reconstruction?

5. Where can I meet others who have had reconstruction?

6. When is the best time to do reconstructive surgery for someone in my situation?

7. What steps will I go through before, during and after my reconstruction?

8. How long will I be in the hospital? How long will it take for me to recover?

9. Will I regain my normal function after the reconstructive surgery?

10. Will the procedure be covered by my health insurance? If not, how much will it cost? Is financial assistance available if I need it?

11. What is a prosthesis? Will I need one?

12. How do I get a prosthesis? Is it covered by health insurance?
1. What kinds of feelings (such as sadness, anger, vulnerability, loss of control) am I likely to have after the surgery or other treatments?

2. Where can I find help coping with my feelings if I need it?

3. How are my family and friends going to feel? How are they going to act?

4. What support is available for my family members?

5. How do I talk to my friends and family about cancer and my treatment?

6. How does a partner or spouse usually react? What can we do to help each other?

7. How can I talk about the changes in my body with my partner?

8. How can I rediscover my sexuality?

9. The treatment has made me feel self-conscious and incomplete. How can I begin to feel whole again?
1. When will I get back to my normal energy level?

2. What will be my schedule for follow-up visits? Which doctor will I see?

3. Do I need to have any tests done on a regular basis? How often?

4. Are there any symptoms that I should report right away? Who do I call?

5. Are there changes I can make to my lifestyle to reduce my risk of cancer coming back?

6. Are there certain foods that I should or shouldn’t eat? Where can I get advice on diet?

7. Where can I find information on ways to reduce stress?

8. Do my family members have a greater risk of getting cancer? What should I tell them about their risk? Do they need genetic testing?

9. What can my family members do to help reduce their risk and make sure that cancer is detected early?

10. Am I at risk of developing a different type of cancer?

11. Who can I contact if I need financial assistance?
complementary therapy
Treatment used together with conventional therapy.
Complementary therapies may help people cope with the disease, its treatment or side effects, rather than treat the disease itself.
An example of complementary therapy is using herbal treatments to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy.

fertility
The ability to produce children.

genetic testing
Examining DNA to look for a gene mutation that may indicate a person has an increased risk for developing a specific disease or disorder.

grade
A description of a tumour that refers to how the cancer cells look and behave under a microscope. It describes how different the cancer cells look from normal cells, how quickly the cancer cells are growing and dividing, and how likely they are to spread.

hormonal therapy
Treatment that adds, blocks or removes hormones.
Hormonal therapy is used to slow or stop the growth of cancer cells that depend on hormones to grow. Hormonal therapies include using drugs, surgery or radiation therapy to change hormone levels.
lymph node
A small, bean-shaped organ that stores lymphocytes and filters lymph fluid for foreign particles, like bacteria and cancer cells.

Lymph nodes are located throughout the body. Groups of lymph nodes are most commonly found in the armpits, groin and neck.

lymphedema
Swelling caused by an abnormal buildup of body fluid called lymph.

Lymphedema happens when nearby lymph vessels or nodes are blocked, or when they have been surgically removed or treated with radiation.

physiotherapy
The use of special exercises or physical activities to treat pain, disease or injury.

prosthesis
An artificial replacement for a missing body part.

radiation therapy
The use of high-energy rays or particles to damage or destroy cancer cells. This includes x-rays, gamma rays, electrons and other sources.

Radiation therapy can be given internally (brachytherapy or systemic therapy) or externally (external radiation therapy).

reconstruction
Surgery to rebuild part of the body.

sentinel lymph node biopsy
Removal and examination of the sentinel lymph node, which is the first lymph node to which cancer cells are likely to spread.

Sometimes there can be more than one sentinel lymph node – in this case, each sentinel lymph node is removed and checked for cancer cells.

side effect
An unwanted or unpleasant symptom caused by medical treatment.

stage
A description of the extent of cancer within the body.

Staging is based on the size of the tumour, the amount of spread to local tissues, involvement of the lymph nodes and whether the disease has spread to other parts of the body. Each cancer type is staged according to its own criteria.

tumour
An abnormal growth of cells. Tumours can be non-cancerous (benign) or cancerous (malignant).
Sexuality and Cancer: A guide for people with cancer will help you better understand how cancer and its treatment may affect your sexuality.

These publications are available in print and on our website at cancer.ca.

Note: These titles are accurate at the time of publication of this booklet.

Talking with someone who has been there
If you have been touched by cancer and would like to talk to someone who has had a similar cancer experience, we can help you connect with a trained volunteer – in person, over the phone or in a group setting.

To contact the Canadian Cancer Society:
• Call us toll-free at 1 888 939-3333 (TTY: 1 866 786-3934) Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• E-mail us at info@cis.cancer.ca.
• Visit our website at cancer.ca.
• Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.

Our services are free and confidential.

Suggested websites
BC Cancer Agency
www.bccancer.bc.ca/PPI/TypesofCancer/default.htm

National Cancer Institute
www.cancer.gov/cancertopics

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

Macmillan Cancer Support
www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Cancertypes/AtoZ.aspx
Questions to Ask about Cancer

We’d like to hear from you
E-mail us at publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca if you have comments or suggestions to help us make this booklet more useful for you and other readers.

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What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

• doing everything we can to prevent cancer
• funding research to outsmart cancer
• empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
• advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
• rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer, our services or to make a donation.