



Canadian Cancer Society  
Société canadienne du cancer

# Questions to Ask about Cancer



Let's Make Cancer History

1 888 939-3333 | [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

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.

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## Introduction

A cancer diagnosis often leads to many questions. Finding the right answers to your questions is important – those answers will help you make the decisions that are right for you. As you learn more about cancer by talking to your healthcare team and by doing your own research, this booklet can help you.

This booklet highlights important topics to consider by suggesting key questions to ask and providing space for your answers. You don't have to ask all the questions. Choose the ones that fit your situation and add questions of your own. Everyone's cancer experience is unique, and by writing down your information, you will have a permanent record to keep and review when you need to.

During your cancer experience, you may come across many words that are new to you. You may find some of these words printed in **bold type** in this booklet. Look for their meanings in the *Word list* at the back of the book.

## 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.



























## Word list

### [A]

#### alternative therapy

Treatment used *instead of* conventional therapy.

Alternative therapies are not part of conventional treatments for cancer because they haven't been scientifically proven to be safe and effective.

An example of an alternative therapy is using a special diet to treat cancer instead of having chemotherapy or another conventional treatment.

### [B]

#### biological therapy

Treatment with natural or manufactured substances that help the body's immune system.

### [C]

#### cancer

The general term for more than 200 diseases in which abnormal cells grow without control. Cancer cells can invade and destroy healthy tissues. Most cancers can also spread to other parts of the body.

#### chemotherapy

The use of drugs to treat cancer.

#### clinical trial

A research study to test new treatments or approaches to finding, reducing the risk for and managing cancer, which may be better than current methods.

#### 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.

### [F]

#### fertility

The ability to produce children.

### [G]

#### 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.

### [H]

#### 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.

## [L]

### 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.

## [P]

### physiotherapy

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

### prosthesis

An artificial replacement for a missing body part.

## [R]

### 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.

## [S]

### 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.

## [T]

### tumour

An abnormal growth of cells. Tumours can be non-cancerous (*benign*) or cancerous (*malignant*).

## Resources

### Canadian Cancer Society

#### *Helping you understand cancer*

Trained information specialists at our *Cancer Information Service* take the time to answer your questions over the telephone and search for the information you need about:

- pain management
- side effects
- self-image
- sexuality
- emotional support
- wigs, hairpieces and headwear
- many other cancer-related issues

You may also find these Canadian Cancer Society publications useful:

*Radiation Therapy: A guide for people with cancer* provides information about radiation therapy, its possible side effects and how to manage them.

*Chemotherapy and Other Drug Therapies: A guide for people with cancer* provides information about chemotherapy, hormonal drug therapy, biological therapy and targeted therapy, along with information on their possible side effects and how to manage them.

*Eating Well When You Have Cancer: A guide to good nutrition* can help you manage your nutrition during treatment.

*Living with Cancer: A guide for people with cancer and their caregivers* can help you cope with practical and emotional issues during your cancer experience.

*Complementary Therapies: A guide for people with cancer* will help you better understand the complementary therapies that are available to you.

*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](http://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](mailto:info@cis.cancer.ca).
- Visit our website at [cancer.ca](http://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](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/PPI/TypesofCancer/default.htm)

#### **National Cancer Institute**

[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics)

#### **American Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

#### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

[www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Cancertypes/AtoZ.aspx](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Cancertypes/AtoZ.aspx)

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## We'd like to hear from you

E-mail us at [publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca](mailto:publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca) if you have comments or suggestions to help us make this booklet more useful for you and other readers.

## 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.



Canadian Cancer Society  
Société canadienne  
du cancer

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1 888 939-3333 | [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

TTY 1 866 786-3934

This is general information developed by the Canadian Cancer Society.  
It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider.

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