



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)
info@cancerca.org
www.cancerca.org

fact sheet

THE VALUE OF ASSERTIVENESS WHEN TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR

“Assertiveness” is the ability to express your wishes, questions and needs in a clear and direct way so that other people, like your health care team, are able to understand what it is you want and need. Being assertive will help improve the quality of the care you receive.



WAYS TO BE ASSERTIVE WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

Use “I” statements when speaking with your doctor. For example: “I know you want to help me, and I need to ask some questions.” “I feel scared and worried.”

Don’t attack or blame the doctor by starting sentences with the word “you:” “You never answer my questions.” “You always rush me.” “Why did you do this?” Instead, say: “How will the medicine or treatment help me?” or “I feel disrespected when I cannot get my questions answered.”

Ask for a translator. If English is not your first language, ask for a translator when you or your relative is being treated in a hospital.

Let the doctor know if you feel rushed, confused, intimidated or dissatisfied. The only way a doctor can help you is if he/she knows what you are thinking— doctors are not mind-readers.

If the doctor says, “Do not worry,” ask him to explain your situation with more information. For example, you may want to ask, “Does that mean my health is improving?”

Let the doctor know if you need him/her to speak slower, clearer or louder. Don’t be embarrassed to say, “I can’t hear you, please speak louder.”

Be honest and detailed. Instead of just saying “oh, fine” or “not so good” when a doctor asks how you are, let them know exactly how your illness is affecting you physically and emotionally.

You deserve to be comfortable. Speak up and tell your doctor about your pain, fatigue or other symptoms of discomfort, even if the doctor does not ask you directly.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT...

Although your health care team will try to give you the best care possible, there may be times when you are dissatisfied, disappointed or angry. If these feelings affect your trust in your doctor, you need to explain your experience in a way that can be heard and understood. Yelling at the doctor or being rude to the nursing staff will not help you get better care.

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Here are some helpful hints about what to do if you or a loved one wants to complain about the care you received:

- Remember that you have a right to be heard.
- Speak to the person you are upset with. Arrange a time that is convenient for both of you.
- Allow the person to respond.
- Discuss the situation with a social worker. He/she may have some suggestions on how to handle this kind of difficulty.
- Often, hospitals have patient representatives whose main responsibility is to resolve these types of conflicts and help improve patient/health care team communication.
- You can also speak to the nursing supervisor, the primary doctor on your team or a hospital administrator. Explain your situation and ask them for assistance.

Get a second opinion. A review of your diagnosis and recommendations for treatment by another doctor is called a “second opinion.” This is often done to make sure you are getting the best advice. It is your right as a patient and gives you confidence in the medical care you are receiving. A second opinion may offer different treatment choices or agree with your present care.

Read CancerCare’s fact sheet title, “When to Get a Second Opinion” for more information.

AN ONCOLOGY SOCIAL WORKER CAN HELP

Oncology social workers understand the complex issues that can arise with a cancer diagnosis. An oncology social worker can help you navigate this process and make you feel comfortable talking with your health care team. CancerCare’s professional oncology social workers can help, free of charge. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).



CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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