



## How to Choose a Doctor: Worksheet

If you've been told you have cancer, you will want to make sure you get the best possible medical care and treatment. You can get names of cancer doctors from the doctor who diagnosed your cancer, but in the end, the choice is yours. You will need to know the name of the cancer you have and what kind of specialist you need to see. Depending on the type of cancer, you might need an oncologist, hematologist, gynecologic oncologist, or other specialist, so you'll need this information to start your search.

Choosing your doctor is one of the most important decisions you'll make. Here are some tips to help you do this:

- The American Medical Association (AMA) website ([www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org)) has a locator service called "Doctor Finder." It can tell you a lot about member doctors, such as their medical school, residency training, certifications, specialty area(s), gender, and contact information.
- The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) website ([www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net)) provides an oncologist directory, "Find a Cancer Doctor," which is a database of ASCO members. You can search by zip code or by doctor's name.
- Try contacting cancer centers near you to ask about doctors who work with people who have your type of cancer. Many hospitals and offices have physician referral lines and websites you can use to find the answers to the questions listed here.
- Consider asking family and friends, as well as nurses and other doctors in your community about who they would recommend.
- Check with your health insurance plan. They can give you the names of doctors who'll accept your insurance coverage.

Here are some questions to think about as you look for a doctor that best meets your needs. If you'd like to learn more, please see our document called *Choosing a Doctor and Hospital*. You can call us at 1-800-227-2345 for a free copy, or read it on our website at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

**Doctor's name:**

**Phone number:**

**Address/location:**

## Questions to ask

### **Are you board certified?**

Board certification means that a doctor has had special training in a certain area and has passed exams. To keep the certification, doctors must continue their education. To find out if a doctor is board certified, contact the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) at [www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org). Or, you can ask about a doctor's certification by phone (if you have a full name and city) at 1-866-275-2267 (1-866-ASK-ABMS.)

### **What is your specialty?**

The type of specialist you need depends on the nature of your medical situation. For example, if radiation therapy is recommended, you'll need to see a radiation oncologist. A gynecologic oncologist is best if you need surgery for ovarian cancer. If you're not sure what kind of specialist you need, talk to the doctor who diagnosed your cancer.

### **Do you have a subspecialty?**

Some doctors focus on part of the specialty in which they trained. For instance, within medical oncology, there may be a subspecialist who works mostly with liver cancer patients. For reconstructive surgery after mastectomy, there are plastic surgeons who specialize in breast reconstruction.

### **How long have you been in practice?**

Experience is key. Years in practice are one measure, but the number of procedures performed or the number of people treated for cancer is also important.

### **How many patients with my type of cancer have you treated in the past year?**

Experience is important, but keep in mind that the number of people treated for a particular type of cancer will also depend on how common the cancer is.

## **Are you or others in your practice involved in clinical trials?**

You might want the option of clinical trials. If your doctor offers clinical trials, this is a sign of a certain level of academic and clinical expertise.

## **What are your office hours? What's the usual wait time for a patient to be seen if they have an appointment?**

You want hours that are flexible enough to fit your schedule. Ask if the office is open late or on weekends. The staff can tell you about typical wait times, adding together waiting room and exam room times. If the wait averages 2 hours, you may want to consider a less crowded practice.

## **How can I reach you outside of office hours?**

You need to be able to reach your doctor during off-office hours. You should have access to a competent oncologist at all times, and be able to speak with someone directly about your medical problem. Most practices have a nurse or doctor "on call" to take calls 24 hours a day, even on weekends and holidays.

## **Who cares for your patients when you are on vacation?**

If you're being seen on a regular basis, your doctor's office should tell you when your doctor is going on vacation. The covering doctor's background, experience, and credentials should be much like those of your regular doctor. Your doctor may have a nurse practitioner or physician assistant who can talk with you when the doctor is away. You may ask that he or she be part of your care, too.

## **Who else will be on my health care team?**

You should have at least a nurse and maybe a social worker on your health care team. You might want to introduce yourself to the entire team for any future needs. If the doctor visit is typically 3 minutes long and the nurse visit is 30 minutes, you need to decide if you are OK with that.

## **What hospitals are you affiliated with? Which do you use for your cancer patients?**

Know which hospitals your doctor can use. What are the hospital's local reputations? This is where you would go for surgery or other care. Make sure your insurance company allows you to use one of these hospitals. See our separate worksheet called *How to Choose a Hospital* for more on this.

## **If I get sick, can I call you and be directly admitted to the hospital without having to go through the emergency room?**

## **May I bring someone with me to my appointments?**

You'll want to know if loved ones are welcome as support throughout your cancer experience.

## **Do you accept my health insurance? How much will each visit cost me?**

**Last Medical Review: 6/23/2014**

**Last Revised: 6/26/2014**

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society  
1-800-227-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)