



Every cancer. Every life.™

# How to Choose a Cancer Doctor

If you or a loved one have been told you have cancer, you'll 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.

Here is a list of questions you might want to ask when looking for a cancer doctor who will meet your needs.

First, find out what kind of cancer you have and what kind of specialist you need to see. There are many types of cancer specialists, such as surgical oncologists, medical oncologists, hematologist-oncologists, radiation oncologists, and gynecologic oncologists, so you'll need this information to start your search.

Next, you will need to find names of a few cancer specialists who might be a good fit for you. Here are some tips:

- Ask your primary care doctor or the doctor who diagnosed you for names of cancer specialists they would recommend.
- Try contacting cancer centers or hospitals 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 answers to your questions.
- Consider asking family and friends, as well as nurses and doctors in your community, if they know of a specialist they would recommend.
- Check with your health insurance plan. They can give you the names of doctors who'll accept your insurance coverage.

You can also search national directories of medical doctors, including those who specialize in treating cancer, to find the type of doctor you need. You can find a list of these directories on **cancer.org** or by calling **1-800-227-2345**. Here are a couple of the more commonly used directories:

- The American Medical Association (AMA) (**ama-assn.org**) has a locator service called Doctor Finder. It provides details about member doctors, such as their specialty area(s) and contact information.
- The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) website (**cancer.net**) provides an oncologist directory called Find a Cancer Doctor. You can search by ZIP code or by doctor name.

Here is some information you may want to gather as you look for the cancer doctor that best meets your needs.

Doctor's name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Address/location \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Questions to Ask

### What is their specialty?

The type of specialist you need depends on the kind of cancer you have and the type of treatment you might need. For example, if radiation therapy is recommended, you'll need to see a radiation oncologist. A gynecologic oncologist may be needed if you have ovarian cancer. If you're not sure what kind of specialist you need, talk to the doctor who diagnosed your cancer.

### Do they have a subspecialty?

Some doctors focus on a specific 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.

### Are they board certified?

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

### How many patients with my type of cancer have they treated in the past year or over their career as a doctor?

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

### Are they or others in their practice involved in clinical trials?

You might want the option of a clinical trial.

### What are their office hours?

You want hours that are flexible enough to fit your schedule. Ask if the office is open late or on weekends.

### Can you bring someone with you to your appointments?

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

### Do they accept your health insurance? Do they have someone you can talk to if you have insurance questions or bills you don't understand?

Money worries are common for people getting treated for cancer. You want to be sure you know what to expect and where you can get answers.

### How can you reach them outside of office hours?

You should have access to a cancer doctor at all times and be able to speak with someone directly about your medical problem. Most practices have a nurse or doctor who takes calls 24 hours a day, even on weekends and holidays.

### Who cares for patients when the doctor is on vacation?

Find out who will take care of you if your doctor is away. The doctor on duty should have credentials like those of your regular doctor. Your cancer doctor may also have a nurse practitioner or physician assistant who you can talk with when the doctor is away.

### Who else will be on your cancer care team?

Find out who else will help with your care, such as nurses, social workers, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, or pharmacists.

### Which hospitals does the doctor send their cancer patients to?

Know which hospitals your cancer doctor sends their patients to. What is the hospital's reputation? This is where you would go for surgery or care for certain problems. Make sure these hospitals are in your health insurance network. See our worksheet called How to Choose a Cancer Center or Hospital for more on this.

If you want to learn more, please call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

