



Coping with Cancer in an Emergency or Disaster Situation

If you (or a loved one) have cancer and have had to leave your home or travel away from where you are getting treatment, or if your treatment plan has been changed due to a recent emergency situation, you may have trouble getting the cancer care you need.

The following questions and answers can help you figure out what you need to do and how to take care of yourself. If you have other questions, call the American Cancer Society's 24/7 cancer helpline at **1-800-227-2345**.

Cancer care and treatment

Q. What do I need to do first if I'm in a temporary shelter?

A: If there is a doctor or nurse on site, try to meet with them right away. Let them know that you have been getting care for your cancer, that you're getting or recently had treatment, and that you need to be put in contact with a doctor or hospital as soon as possible. If you will need a ride to get there, be sure to let them know this, too. **If there are no doctors or nurses at the temporary shelter or housing**, ask the person in charge of the shelter or person you're staying with to help put you in touch with a local hospital. **Keep in mind that COVID-19 and other infections can be very serious for people getting cancer treatment.** It may be hard to practice social distancing, so you may want to wear a mask or other face covering to help protect yourself.

Q. What should I do if I have an emergency?

A: If you have cancer and think you need to get medical help right away, many shelters have a nurse, doctor, or a person in charge who can help you get proper care. Make sure you tell them about your cancer, and if you don't have a new doctor yet, ask them for help finding one.

Q. What can I do to keep getting my cancer care and treatment?

A: If you are still in the area where your cancer doctor or treatment facility is located but have had to miss an appointment or if you have had to stop treatment because of power outage, loss of transportation, damage to your home, damage to the doctor's office or treatment center, or other reasons, contact your doctor as soon as you can and find out what you need to do to continue treatment. If you can't get in touch with your cancer doctor, try your treatment center, local hospital, or your regular family doctor if you have one.

If you had to leave the area where you were getting treatment, you need to find a new cancer doctor and treatment center as soon as you can. Ask for help from the shelter staff or the organizations that are helping at your shelter or in the local area where you are staying. You can also try to get to a local hospital information desk and ask for help.

Q. What about the medicines and tests I get for my cancer?

A: If you have your medicines with you and know how to take them, keep taking them on schedule. If you need medicine, are almost out of medicine, or are unsure how to take it, you should talk to a nurse or doctor first, or ask someone at the shelter for help getting in touch with a pharmacist, nurse, or doctor. If you know you need tests, such as blood tests, x-rays, or scans, talk to a nurse or doctor to find out when and where you can get them scheduled and how you will find out the results of the tests.

Q. What if I don't know what kind of cancer treatment I was getting or what medicine I was taking?

A: If there's any way you can contact your doctor or treatment center, call and get your medical records sent to you or to a local cancer doctor as soon as possible. This can help the new doctor know how to go on with your treatment right away and get you any medicines you need.

Q. What if I can't get my medical records or get in touch with my doctor?

A: Write down anything you can remember about your treatment so you'll have this information to share with the new doctor. Include things like:

- The type of cancer you have and the stage (extent) of the cancer, if you know it
- Type of treatment(s) you've had, like chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery
- How long you've been in treatment
- Date of your last treatment
- Name of your doctor and treatment center
- All medicines you're taking (both cancer medicines and other medicines, including over-the-counter drugs). If you don't know names, describe them by how you take them (as a pill, a quick shot, or a longer infusion); if it's a pill, try to describe it by its color, size, and shape; how often you take it; etc.
- Any other illnesses or health problems you have

Q. What if I'm taking pain medicine or medicine for treatment side effects?

A: Stopping some pain medicines and other medicines all at once can cause problems. If you need to contact your doctor, a new doctor, or a pharmacy about getting your cancer medicines, be sure to ask about your pain pills and other medicines, too. Be ready to tell them if you are still taking them, if you have cut down on how much you're taking, and if you still have some or have run out of them. If you have run out, tell them how long you have been without the medicines. It's also a good idea to tell the nurse or doctor at the shelter (if there is one) or a shelter worker, as well as family members or friends that you take these medicines – just in case you have problems.

Q. What about other medicines?

A: There are some medicines that you can do without for a few days, but stopping others can cause trouble. For example, suddenly stopping certain sleeping medicines or anxiety medicines can cause problems for a few days. Stopping medicines to treat high blood pressure, diabetes, seizures, or low thyroid levels might lead to these problems getting out of control. Talk to the nurse, doctor, or shelter worker about these medicines, too.

Q. What if I'm going back to my doctor and treatment center?

A: If you have plans to go back to your previous doctor or treatment center, let the new doctor know you want to go home for treatment when it becomes possible to do so. Make sure to ask for a copy of any current medical records from your new doctor to take back to your previous treatment center.

Living conditions and hygiene

If you're being treated for cancer, you need to be very careful to protect yourself from illness and infections. Some kinds of cancer and cancer treatments can weaken your immune system and make it very easy for you to get a serious infection.

Q. Should I get immunizations or vaccines if they are offered?

A: If you're in an area where safe water and food may be a problem or you could be injured due to the emergency situation, you may be asked to get shots for illnesses such as hepatitis A, hepatitis B, the flu, pneumococcus, and tetanus. While these vaccines are safe and may be needed, make sure the person giving the shots knows you have cancer and when you last had treatment. If you can, talk to a doctor before you get any shots.

It's very important that you **do not let anyone give you a "live" vaccine** unless a cancer doctor who knows your medical history says it's OK. Some vaccines have live viruses in them. Sometimes the live viruses can cause serious problems for people with weak immune systems. Also, try to avoid close contact with people who have gotten live virus vaccines.

Q. What can I do to protect myself from infections and germs?

A: Do these things to help protect yourself:

- Wash your hands with soap and water as often as possible. Keep washing for at least 20 seconds.
- If you can't get soap and water, ask for alcohol-based hand sanitizers and be sure to follow the directions on the product.
- Try to avoid touching surfaces that are frequently touched, like handrails. If you have to touch these surfaces, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer immediately after.
- Protect yourself from germs by wearing a mask or face covering when recommended.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, practice social distancing if you can. Try to stay at least 6 feet from other people who are not part of your household.

- If there's no safe water or you don't know if the water is safe, drink only bottled water or boil water for one full minute then allow it to cool before drinking it.
- Some foods might have germs that could be harmful to you. Make sure all meats are thoroughly cooked and all fruits and vegetables are thoroughly washed in safe water. Don't eat cooked foods that have been left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Be sure to ask a doctor if there are foods you should avoid until you can get into permanent housing or back home.
- If you have any cuts or wounds, keep them clean and covered with bandages UNLESS your doctor tells you otherwise. If you have an antibiotic ointment or cream, use it daily if it is OK with your doctor.
- Bathe or shower regularly if you can, and use clean towels if possible.
- Don't share toothbrushes or unwashed eating utensils or cups with others.

Q. Should I ask to be separated from others in the shelter or home? Should I ask to go to a "special needs" shelter?

A: Some shelters may have separate areas for people with special medical needs. And in some cases, special needs shelters might be available. Whether a special needs shelter would be better for you depends on where you are in your treatment plan. If you've just gotten chemo and have very low white blood cell counts, your risk for infections may be higher in a crowded public shelter. Still, your options may be limited.

Try to talk with a doctor or nurse, or a shelter worker, about your medical situation to see what options might be available and whether another location might be safer for you. The important thing is to make sure to take good care of yourself and follow any instructions the doctor gives you. Try to keep your body clean and stay away from people who have fevers, coughs, or any other signs of illness.

We have a lot more information that you might find helpful. Visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 cancer helpline toll-free at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here to help you any time, day or night.



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