

Caring for Someone with Cancer

Caregivers for people with cancer may be family or friends, and every situation is different. Caregiving can mean helping with daily tasks, medical care, coordinating care, or giving emotional support. It's common to feel confused and stressed, and asking for help and sharing your feelings can make caregiving easier to manage.

This page is for anyone caring for a family member or friend with cancer. It covers what caregiving involves, coping, asking for help, and long-distance care.

What caregiving means

There are different types of caregivers for people with cancer. Some are family members. Others are friends. People of different races and cultures give care in their own way. Every situation is different, and there isn't one way that works best.

Caregiving may include:

- helping with day-to-day activities such as doctor visits or preparing food
- giving medicines or helping with physical therapy or other clinical tasks
- helping with tasks of daily living such as using the bathroom or bathing
- coordinating care and services from a distance by phone or email
- giving emotional and spiritual support

Coping with the caregiver role

Giving care and support can be hard. Many caregivers put their own needs and feelings aside to focus on the person with cancer. That is hard to keep up over time. It is also not good for your health. The stress can affect you physically and mentally. **If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to take care of others.**

You may find yourself in a new caregiving role that feels more intense than before. That happens whether you are younger or older. Some common situations come up again and again. A loved one may only feel comfortable with a spouse or partner caring for them. A caregiver may be balancing children and a job. A parent may have a hard time accepting help from an adult child. It's very common to feel confused and stressed. If you can, share your feelings with others. Join a support group, or seek help from a counselor.

Asking for help

Many caregivers look back and say they took on too much. Others wish they'd asked for help sooner. Take an honest look at what you can and can't do. Which things do you want to do yourself? Which ones can you hand over or share?

Here are tasks others can help with:

- chores like cooking, cleaning, shopping, or yard work
- taking care of the kids or picking them up
- driving your loved one to appointments or picking up medicines
- being the contact person to keep others updated

Getting help for yourself can also help your loved one. You may stay healthier. And they may feel less guilty about all you're doing. Websites like SignUpGenius or Lotsa Helping Hands can help organize requests and tasks.

Practical caregiver checklists

Sometimes the question is not "what is caregiving?" but "what should I do next?" Then start with the practical guides for chemo day, medication safety at home, someone who refuses help, caregiver burnout, and long-distance appointment coordination.

When some people don't help

When someone has cancer, many friends and family reach out. But some people may not be able to help. The reasons are common ones. They may be coping with their own problems. They may not have the time. They may be afraid of cancer, or have had a bad experience with it. They may believe in keeping their distance. They may not realize how hard things are. Or they may feel awkward because they don't know what to say.

If someone isn't giving the help you need, you have two choices. You can talk to them and explain your needs. Or you can let it go. If the relationship is important, telling them how you feel can stop resentment from building up.

Understanding the cancer

Understanding your loved one's medical situation can help you feel more confident and more in control. You may want to know more about their type and stage of cancer. You may want to know what to expect during treatment. That means the tests and procedures that will be done, and the side effects that may follow.

Long-distance caregiving

It can be hard to be away from a loved one who has cancer. Even so, you can give support from a distance. You can be a problem-solver and a care coordinator.

- Develop a relationship with one or two key members of the health care team, such as a nurse, social worker, or patient educator.
- Create a list of people who live near your loved one whom you could call day or night.
- Share home, work, and cell numbers and emails with the care team and local helpers.
- Look into volunteer visitors, adult day care, or meal delivery in the area.
- Gather and organize important paperwork, and keep vital information in one place.
- Use phone, email, and video tools like Zoom or FaceTime, or websites like Caring Bridge and Lotsa Helping Hands, to stay connected.

If you travel to visit, allow yourself time to rest afterward. Many long-distance caregivers say they don't build in enough recovery time.

When to get help sooner

Part of the job is knowing which changes cannot wait until the next appointment.

- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** the person you care for is struggling to breathe, cannot be woken, has a seizure, or has bleeding that firm pressure will not stop. Sudden swelling of the face, lips or tongue along with hives or wheezing is also an emergency, per [MedlinePlus](https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000844.htm) (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000844.htm). Do not drive yourself.
- **A temperature of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher, or shaking chills, is an emergency during treatment.** Call the 24-hour oncology number straight away, at any hour. If nobody answers, take them to an emergency department and say they are on cancer treatment. For someone on chemotherapy, [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html) ([cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)) calls this reading a medical emergency and says to call the doctor at once. Fever can be the only sign of infection, and infection can be life-threatening. This is not a wait-for-morning call.
- **Call the care team right away, at any hour, if** you see new redness, swelling or pus around a port or catheter line, or mouth sores that stop them drinking, or, if they are on chemotherapy, vomiting or diarrhea that will not settle. Do not wait for a fever. CDC lists redness or swelling at a port, new mouth sores, vomiting and diarrhea among the signs of infection to call about right away ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/symptoms.html) ([cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/symptoms.html](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/symptoms.html))). [NCI](https://www.nationalcancer.org/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection) ([cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection](https://www.nationalcancer.org/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection)) says infections need urgent care.
- **Call the care team the same day if** they are not on chemotherapy and have vomiting or diarrhea that will not settle.
- **Call the care team within a day or two if** they are eating and drinking much less than before, have become unsteady walking, or a side effect you were told to expect is clearly worsening instead of settling.

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/caregiver-support)

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