

Getting a Second Opinion After a Diagnosis

A second opinion means asking another cancer doctor to review your test results and treatment plan. It is common, and most doctors expect it. In most cases there is time to get one before starting treatment. Bring copies of your pathology report, scans, and treatment plan, and check what your insurance covers first.

This page is for anyone with a new cancer diagnosis or treatment plan who wonders whether to ask another doctor. It covers timing, how to ask, what to bring, and what to do if the opinions differ.

The simple version

A second opinion means asking another cancer doctor to look at your test results. They talk with you about your case. Then they tell you what they would recommend.

It is one of the most normal things in cancer care. People get second opinions to confirm a diagnosis. Some want to hear about other treatment options. Some just want to feel more certain before starting treatment. Doctors are used to the request, and your care does not have to stop while you get one.

A second opinion is common, and it can help you feel confident in your treatment plan.

Is there enough time?

This is usually the first worry. For most people the answer is reassuring. With most cancers, treatment decisions do not have to be made the same week you are diagnosed. Taking time to learn about your cancer, how serious it is, and what your options are is a normal part of good care.

A few cancers do need treatment decisions right away. The safest approach is to ask your doctor directly:

- "Is my cancer one where we need to start treatment immediately?"
- "Would waiting for a second opinion change my outcome?"

If your doctor says there is time, you can seek a second opinion without putting your health at risk. If they say time matters, ask how quickly a second opinion could be arranged.

Why people get second opinions

Common reasons include:

- You want to be sure you have looked at all your options.
- You have a rare or unusual cancer, and you want a doctor who sees it often.
- Your doctor is not a specialist in your type of cancer.
- Nobody is certain about the exact type or stage of your cancer.
- Your doctor has offered several treatment options, and you are not sure how to choose.
- You think a newer treatment or a clinical trial might be available.
- You are having trouble understanding your doctor, or talking with them.
- Your insurance company asks for a second opinion before treatment starts.
- You simply want to know the diagnosis is right and the plan is sound.

Any of these is reason enough. You do not need to justify the request.

How to ask your doctor

Some people worry about hurting their doctor's feelings. Remember: second opinions are routine, and it is your choice to make. If you are not sure how to bring it up, try one of these:

- "I'm thinking of getting a second opinion. Can you recommend someone?"
- "Before we start treatment, I'd like to get a second opinion. Will you help me with that?"
- "If you had this type of cancer, who would you see for a second opinion?"
- "I'd like to talk with another doctor to be sure I've covered all my bases."

Many doctors will help you get a second opinion. Ask your doctor, or contact another cancer center directly.

What to gather before the appointment

The second doctor needs the exact details of your diagnosis and your proposed treatment. Have these ready:

- a copy of your **pathology report** — the report on the tissue taken at any biopsy or surgery
- a copy of your **operative report**, if you had surgery
- your **discharge summary**, if you were in the hospital
- a summary of your doctor's **current treatment plan**
- a **list of all your medicines**, the doses, and when you took them
- your **imaging** — scans are often shared on a disc or online, and the second doctor may also want the original pathology slides read again

You can ask your doctor's office to send records straight to the second doctor. Or you can request copies from the hospital's medical records department, or from your online patient portal. Keep copies of everything for yourself, too.

For a fuller checklist, see [How to Organize Cancer Medical Records](#). If the second-opinion center wants the actual tissue reviewed, see [How to Get Pathology Slides for a Second Opinion](#).

Before booking, call your insurance company. Ask what your plan covers. Ask whether the second doctor has to be in your network. Ask whether a second opinion is required before treatment starts.

Where to go

Once your records are ready, the next step is choosing who to see. Here are ways to find a doctor for a second opinion.

- A recommendation from your current doctor.
- A nearby hospital, medical clinic, or cancer center. Larger centers, including NCI-designated cancer centers, often have teams that specialize in one cancer type.
- The American Board of Medical Specialties directory. Use it to check that a doctor is board-certified.
- Your insurance company's list of covered specialists.

If the two opinions differ

It happens. It does not mean anyone made a mistake. Cancer care often has more than one reasonable path. If the second opinion differs from the first:

- Make an appointment with your first doctor to talk through the differences.
- Ask both doctors to explain how they arrived at their treatment plans.
- Ask how each one read your test results.
- Ask what research studies or professional guidelines they relied on.
- Ask whether the two doctors can review your case together.

Sometimes another specialist can help you make sense of the two opinions. That might be a pathologist, a surgeon, a medical oncologist, or a radiation oncologist. You can also read the treatment guidelines yourself. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) guidelines and the National Cancer Institute's PDQ summaries both come in patient versions, written in everyday language.

A differing second opinion is information, not a crisis — asking both doctors to explain their reasoning usually makes the best path clearer.

The takeaway

A second opinion can confirm your diagnosis. It can open up options you had not heard about. Or it can simply give you confidence that your plan is right. For most cancers there is time to get one. Insurance often covers it. Doctors expect the request. If it would help you move forward with more peace of mind, it is worth doing.

Source: American Cancer Society (cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/seeking-a-second-opinion.html)

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