

Just Diagnosed With Cancer: What to Do First

A cancer diagnosis is overwhelming, and strong feelings are common. In the first days, focus on understanding your exact diagnosis and stage, asking about your options, and building your care team and support. Ask your team how much time you have to decide.

First, take a breath

A cancer diagnosis can feel unreal. Fear, anger, and stress are common. In the first days it can be hard to take in information. Give yourself permission to pause and breathe. Then ask your team how much time you have before decisions are needed.

Understand your exact diagnosis

Not all cancers are the same, and the details matter more than the word "cancer" alone. Ask your team for:

- The exact type of cancer
- Where it started
- The stage, meaning the extent of the cancer, such as how large the tumor is and whether it has spread

Ask them to write this down for you, or repeat it back in your own words to check you have it right. This information is what lets you compare treatment options later and feel more in control of decisions ahead.

Ask how much time you have

How soon treatment must start depends on the cancer. Ask your team directly whether anything is urgent and how long you have to decide. Ask them to explain why.

Build your team and support

Your care is usually led by an oncologist, a doctor who treats cancer. They work with a wider team. This often includes an oncology nurse or nurse navigator who can answer questions between visits.

Beyond the medical team, lean on family, friends, and support groups. NCI also offers help by phone at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) and through its LiveHelp online chat. Many people find it easier to bring someone to appointments to listen and take notes.

Ask about a second opinion

A second opinion means another doctor reviews your diagnosis and plan. Ask your team whether one makes sense for you, and how to arrange it, before a major treatment decision.

What to ask your team

NCI advises taking a list of questions to each appointment. It is easy to forget them once you are in the room. Helpful early questions include:

- What exact type and stage of cancer do I have?
- What are my treatment options, and what is the goal of each?
- What are the expected side effects, and how are they managed?
- How much time do I have to decide, and can I get a second opinion?
- Who is my main point of contact for questions between visits?

Sources

- [National Cancer Institute — Coping With Cancer](https://cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping) (cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping)
- [National Cancer Institute — Cancer Staging](https://cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging) (cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging)

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