

What Is Palliative Care? Comfort During Cancer

Palliative care is care meant to improve quality of life for people with a serious illness like cancer. It treats symptoms and side effects and addresses emotional, social, spiritual, and practical needs. It can be given along with cancer treatment, at any point from diagnosis onward. It is different from hospice, and insurance often covers it.

What palliative care is

This page explains what palliative care is, who gives it, and how to get it. Palliative care is care meant to improve quality of life for people with a serious or life-threatening disease, such as cancer. It can be given alongside treatment meant to cure the cancer. It can also be given on its own.

Palliative care looks at the whole person, not just the disease. The goal is to prevent or treat symptoms and side effects as early as possible. That covers the effects of the disease and of its treatment. It also covers related psychological, social and spiritual concerns.

You can receive palliative care in the hospital, in an outpatient clinic, in a long-term care facility, or at home. A licensed health care provider directs it. Anyone can receive it, whatever their age or stage of disease.

Many of the same methods used to treat cancer can also help you feel more comfortable. Doctors may give chemotherapy or radiation therapy to slow the growth of a tumor that is causing pain. Surgery may remove a mass that is pressing on nerves.

Who provides it

Palliative care is usually provided by palliative care specialists. These are health care practitioners with special training and, sometimes, certification. They focus on the physical, emotional, social and spiritual issues that people with cancer may face.

These specialists often work as part of a team. It may include doctors, nurses, registered dietitians, pharmacists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, chaplains, psychologists and social workers. The palliative care team works together with your oncology team, the team treating your cancer. Together they manage your care and support the best possible quality of life. They also support caregivers, help members of the health care team communicate, and guide discussions about goals of care.

What it addresses

The effects of cancer differ from person to person. So palliative care can address a wide range of needs:

- **Physical.** Common symptoms that can be addressed include pain, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, and insomnia.
- **Emotional and coping.** Specialists can provide resources to help with the feelings that come with cancer, such as depression, anxiety and fear.
- **Spiritual.** People often look more deeply for meaning after a cancer diagnosis. A palliative care expert can help you explore your beliefs and values. The aim is a sense of peace or acceptance that fits your situation.
- **Caregiver needs.** Family and friends have changing needs too, and many caregivers feel overwhelmed. Specialists can help caregivers cope and get the support they need.
- **Practical needs.** They can help with money and legal worries, insurance questions, and problems at work. They can also help with discussions about goals of care and advance directives.

Palliative care and hospice are not the same

Palliative care may be given at any point during cancer care, from diagnosis to the end of life. Hospice care begins later. It starts when cure is no longer the goal and the only focus is quality of life.

Palliative care can help patients and their loved ones move into hospice. It prepares them for the physical changes near the end of life. It helps them cope with different thoughts and emotions. And it provides support for family members and caregivers.

Getting palliative care and paying for it

The oncologist, or someone on the oncology team, is the first person to ask about palliative care. They may refer you to a palliative care specialist, based on your physical and emotional needs. Some national organizations keep lists of providers by state.

Private health insurance usually covers palliative care services. Medicare and Medicaid also pay for some kinds of palliative care. Medicaid coverage varies by state. If you don't have insurance, or are unsure about your coverage, ask a social worker or your hospital's financial counselor for help.

Research supports palliative care. Studies show it can benefit the health and well-being of patients and families. Some studies looked at adding palliative care soon after a diagnosis of advanced cancer. They found it can improve quality of life and mood. It may even help people live longer. The American Society of Clinical Oncology recommends that all patients with advanced cancer receive palliative care.

Planning conversations

Related planning guides include when to consider hospice, goals-of-care conversations, and DNR orders and cancer care. These pages are educational starting points for conversations with the care team.

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/advanced-cancer/care-choices/palliative-care-fact-sheet)

Last updated: 2026-08-09

Online: cancerexplained.org/living-with-cancer/palliative-care

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