

Caring for Someone with Cancer

Discover ways to provide support to a family member or friend with cancer.

As a caregiver, your support is crucial to the physical and emotional well-being of your family member or friend with cancer. That level of responsibility can be rewarding and fulfilling, but it's not without its challenges. Nobody fully understands the demands of supporting a loved one faced with cancer until they experience it for themselves.

A good way to rise to the challenge is to empower yourself with information and support. The following tips are designed to help you manage the road ahead — from day-to-day tasks to watching for complications and speaking up in doctor's appointments.

Embrace Your Role As a Key Member of the Caregiving Team

As a cancer caregiver, you're likely going to do much more than take care of daily tasks and provide emotional support to your loved one. Cancer caregivers are often closely involved in coordinating care. Those tasks may include:

- ✓ Administering drugs
- ✓ Managing side effects
- ✓ Keeping a close eye on the effectiveness of treatments
- ✓ Keeping medical professionals informed of changes
- ✓ Managing paperwork
- ✓ Maintaining a record of tests and their results
- ✓ Asking questions and taking notes



The type of treatment and side effects you can expect to manage will depend on their specific type of cancer. Always be willing to ask for more information if you don't understand something or need more clarification.




Find a Support Group

Personal relationships are an important source of comfort for many caregivers. Some find cancer support groups for their loved one's specific form of cancer to be beneficial. You may come away feeling empowered with new caretaking ideas as well as uplifted by being with people in similar circumstances. Don't allow yourself to feel guilty for taking the time to attend support group meetings. Plus, you could walk away from the next meeting you attend with fresh new ideas for helping your care recipient.

Help to Manage Appetite Loss

Many cancer patients experience problems with their appetite and ability to eat at some point. This is often due to chemotherapy, radiation or medications they may be taking. When this happens, caregivers can advocate for their patients by asking the medical team about care that might help address and treat the cause of appetite loss.

Since getting good nutrition plays a big role in recovery, you can also do the following to encourage your care recipient to eat more:

-  Prepare five or more small meals daily and encourage snacking.
-  Try to keep track of what times of day your loved one seems to be hungry and take advantage of those times by preparing nutrient-rich foods. Yogurt, cheeses, protein bars, creamy soups and smoothies are good sources of calories and protein.
-  Sneak in calories and protein by adding cheese, sour cream and butter to dishes. If your friend or family member is able to enjoy a cup of coffee, use cream rather than skim milk. Ladle an extra spoonful of gravy on top of mashed potatoes. Forego low-fat versions of foods for their full-fat counterparts.

Ask Questions and Advocate

What are the goals of this treatment?

How long will it last?

Do you have any written information about this treatment?

What are the side effects?

How will side effects be managed?

How do we know if a side effect is severe enough to call you?

Are there other treatment options available?

What is the best way to let you know when we have questions about treatment?

Strive to Solve Problems

See yourself as a problem solver who can help the person you're caring for get through challenges and deal with setbacks. For example, if your friend or family member needs to be hospitalized because of a low white blood count, you can bring things from home to make their hospital stay more comfortable. You can also keep the entire medical team informed of what's going on and start coordinating care and appointments in anticipation of the hospital release date. By removing tasks, chores and problems from your loved one's to-do list, you're allowing self-care and recovery to be the top priority.

Prepare for Ups and Downs

As a caregiver, you're going to have good days and bad days. You'll have days when you feel strong and capable, and days when you feel overwhelmed and exhausted. You are human, after all! Being a caregiver is a huge responsibility. It carries with it both the highs of helping someone you love, and the lows of taking on such a tremendous responsibility. Expect your emotions and energy to fluctuate.

Perfection is not the goal when it comes to caregiving. Simply do whatever you can with the time, resources and support available to you, and remember to ask for — and accept — help.

The more you feel supported, the more you can support the people you love.

Watch for Complications

If your care recipient is experiencing unexpected complications from cancer and its treatments, or if you are concerned about changes you're seeing that don't appear to be treatment-related, get in touch with the medical team. The Mayo Clinic points to the following complications that should be on your radar:

Pain

Fatigue

Difficulty breathing

Nausea

Diarrhea or constipation

Weight loss

Chemical imbalances (typically signaled by excessive thirst, frequent urination, constipation and confusion)

Brain and nervous system problems (for example, weakness on one side of the body)

Sources:

Diabetes care: 10 ways to avoid complications

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/diabetes/in-depth/diabetes-management/art-20045803>

Cancer overview

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cancer/symptomscauses/syc-20370588>

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