

Help with Making Decisions for Older Adults with a Cancer Diagnosis

Cancer treatment can be challenging and complicated for anyone, and even more so for older adults. As you and your family make treatment decisions, you should think about your current quality of life, what you value most and what you hold dear.

Chronic health problems unrelated to cancer, such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease or arthritis, need to be considered during cancer treatment. What are the current physical abilities, do you need assistance at home or when going outside the home? For an older adult, it is important that the treatment plan and health care team take into account the individual's overall health status.

Have an honest discussion with your doctor about what matters to you and what the quality of life will be with treatment as compared to without treatment.

Who do you, the patient, want to be involved in making decisions about your treatment?

- You, family members, physician, Healthcare Power of Attorney, surrogate, others?
- Plan discussions with family and care team for shared treatment decisions.

Considerations for treatment decisions if you or the patient you are supporting has memory or thinking issues:

- Patient may have trouble with their chemo-education, not being able to understand the information. If the patient cannot repeat or restate the information given, could indicate future complications.
- Patient may have adherence difficulties to chemo/oncotherapy due to not understanding when treatment is to be delivered or taken.
- Patient may have logistical issues getting to the treatment location.

Important questions / discussions to have with the care team to make shared treatment decisions:

- Was your cancer caught early or has it already spread in your body? What is the stage and what does that mean?
- What is the likely outcome of the treatment? Is the purpose of the treatment curative, palliative or to extend life by how much time?
- What is your prognosis (likely outcome/result) with and without treatment.
- How complex is the treatment, what are the possible side effects and how may it drastically affect the quality of your life?
- Could the treatment hasten death?
- How might other existing health issues or disabilities be affected by treatment?
- How may this treatment impact caregiving you may need?

Content adapted from websites below

Resources for Additional Information:

- [Cancer.Net, Cancer Care Decisions for Older Adults](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Cancer and Aging](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Older Adults Coping With Cancer](#)
- [Understanding Cancer Prognosis, NIH/National Cancer Institute](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [Cancer.Net, Decisiones sobre la atención del cáncer para adultos mayores](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Cáncer y envejecimiento](#)
- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Delirio](#)

Radiation Treatment Considerations for the older patient:

- Functional status, your ability to do or not do daily activities, having physical impairments such as using a walker, and/or having comorbidities are of utmost importance when considering radiation treatment¹.
- Radiation treatment is fatiguing
- Radiation treatment has a physically and logistically demanding schedule. Treatment schedule could be daily appointments over the course of several weeks.
- Brain radiation often causes cognitive issues. If brain radiation is discussed as a treatment option, ask what the expected benefits are and what can be done to help with them. The damage potential from brain radiation is high.
- If patient is identified as frail, they may be less likely to recover from radiation treatments compared to younger people¹.

Make sure to consider and understand how the treatment may affect existing physical abilities.

- Treatment may negatively affect your ability to do daily activities, you may need help with doing things that before you could do independently.
- If you have frailty issues (use a walker, rollator or wheelchair), there is a greater possibility that treatment will negatively affect your day to day functioning or independence.
- You may need physical therapy before treatment to help you be able to handle and tolerate the physical side effects.

When the decision is to treat the cancer, you or the patient you are supporting may need a family member or caretaker available to assist with:

- Providing care, comfort and security
- Transportation to and from treatment
- Making sure all medications are taken properly
- Keeping track of side effects and understanding how and when to contact the care team to avoid major complications

1. Sanders Chang, Nathan E. Goldstein, and Kavita V. Dharmarajan, "Managing an Older Adult with Cancer: Considerations for Radiation Oncologists," BioMed Research International, vol. 2017, Article ID 1695101, 13 pages, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/1695101>.

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