

# Making decisions about treatment



- what type of cancer it is
- the size of the cancer and whether it has spread to other parts of the body (its stage)
- how fast-growing the cancer may be (its grade).

It could be useful to write down any questions you have or take a copy of the Cancer Society booklet *Questions you may wish to ask* to your doctor's appointment.

To help you remember information, you may want to take notes or ask for written information about your cancer. Ask your doctor, nurse or a trusted agency like the Cancer Society. You could also bring a friend or family member with you to your appointments.

For cancer information and support, phone the Cancer Society's Information Helpline **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or visit our website [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz).

## This information sheet has been written to help you make decisions about your cancer treatment.

When you are diagnosed with cancer, your doctor will talk to you about your treatment options. You may be asked to make a choice about whether or not to have treatment, or to choose between treatments that offer the same result. It is important you are informed and comfortable with the decision you make.

## Learning about your cancer

Sometimes it can be difficult to decide on the type of treatment to have. Understanding your diagnosis, the treatment and its side effects will help you to make informed decisions. Some people want to find out as much as they can about treatment options. Others prefer to know just a little.

To make a decision about your cancer treatment, you may wish to know:

- where in the body the cancer started, such as the breast or prostate

## Understanding why different treatments are offered

The treatment you receive will depend on your individual cancer diagnosis. Your cancer doctor will discuss the best treatments for you.

Your doctor may talk about statistics for the treatment options you are offered. Statistics can explain how well a treatment works for a large number of people, but they can't predict how well the treatment will work for you. When offering you treatment options, your doctor will also consider your general health, your stage and type of cancer and any other information that is relevant to you.

There are different types of treatment for cancer. The main treatment options are:

- surgery
- chemotherapy
- radiation therapy
- hormonal therapy
- targeted therapies
- antibody therapy, including "monoclonal antibodies" and "immunotherapy".



You may be given a choice of treatment options, which your cancer specialist will discuss with you.

Sometimes there will only be one treatment option but you may want to choose whether or not to go ahead with treatment.

*30 years (as a patient, I've heard dozens of wildly different opinions from ex-patients, partners, family and friends of friends). It's okay to listen to these people and their opinions, but tread carefully. Many are based on experiences or beliefs from treatment options in the past: not current to your situation."* **Nick**

## Taking part in a clinical trial

Finding out information about your treatment options can help you make the right decision about your treatment. When you're diagnosed, a lot of information is collected about your stage and type of cancer. This information helps your specialist to decide on which treatments to offer you and in what order you will have them. The treatment offered will be planned specifically for you.

Alongside the aims of your treatment, your personal wishes will be an important part of decision-making. The most important thing to remember is that the decision you make is the right one for you at the time.

Your lifestyle and long-term goals will play a role in this decision-making. For example, you may want to have children in the future and so fertility is an issue for you. You may also be concerned about long-term effects on your appearance. These are things you can discuss with your cancer doctor.

There may be times when your treatment options are more limited. You might have fewer treatment options or have less time to make your decision (for example, if your treatment needs to start quickly). It's still important to raise the issue with your cancer doctor.

Practical, emotional and social support is available regardless of whatever treatment decisions you make.

## Talking to other people who have had cancer

Often people who have been in a similar situation can offer advice on their own experience. Remember that everyone's situation is different. Other people won't be able to tell you which treatment options will be more effective for you or exactly what side effects you may get. They can tell you what it was like to have the treatment, how it made them feel and what helped them to cope with the side effects they experienced.

The Cancer Society runs a peer support programme called Cancer Connect. Details are available on our website [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz) or through the Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER** (226 237).

*"Friends and family members may have formed opinions on treatment choices they've made or heard about over the past*

## Helping you decide

When you're making your decision you may want to consider the following:

- There are several different health professionals you can ask to provide information and support to help make a decision. For example, a cancer nurse coordinator, a clinical nurse specialist at your oncology department, your GP or Cancer Society information staff.
- Sometimes it may be useful to talk about your treatment options with another doctor. This is called a second opinion.
- It's important to ask your doctor to explain the things that aren't clear to you.
- Ask your doctor how long you have to make a decision. This could be different for everyone. • You may wish to talk about your decision with your family or someone you trust
- You can change your mind at any time about your treatment, but make sure you talk about it with your doctor first.
- Getting information from reliable sources helps to ensure it is accurate and up to date.

## Using the internet

Getting information from the internet about your cancer, its treatment, and the services available may be helpful. While some of what you read will be useful, you may also find that some is false and misleading. It is important to think about where you find your information and to discuss it with your health care team.

*"Personally, on being diagnosed, I deliberately chose to stop googling after one afternoon, because I found the experience draining and frustrating, raising more uncertainty than I thought was good for me. Instead, I chose to put my energy into being an enquiring patient with the medical team around me."* **Nick**

For more information, read the resource "Using the Internet for Cancer Information and Support", on the Cancer Society's website ([www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)) or phone the staff on the Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER**.