

Talking to your healthcare professional about your symptoms or concerns



“I brought a list of questions to my appointment but I was a bit nervous about asking them. I didn’t want my doctor to think they were silly or that I was wasting his time. He always seems to be so busy. But once we started talking after he examined me, the conversation was really good. He reassured me that the pain I was having was completely normal and that the exercise I wanted to tr to help manage it was ok.”

Gary
diagnosed with bowel cancer

Your healthcare professional is there to help you

It can be intimidating talking to your healthcare professionals. Many patients are afraid of bothering their busy doctors or that their concerns are not important enough to take up appointment time. Sometimes patients are unsure how to describe what they feel or need, so they end up saying nothing. However, the better your healthcare professional understands your concerns and how your treatment is affecting you, the better they are able to help you. Good communication with your healthcare team will help you feel more satisfied with your care, and more in control and less anxious.

The following sections describe tips to help you get the most out of your appointment.



Tip 1. Know who your medical team is and what they do

Depending on how your cancer centre is organized and the type of cancer treatment you are getting, there may be a lot of different healthcare professionals that are part of the team available to help you. Your team may include oncologists, pivot nurses (also called nurse navigators), radiotherapists, surgeons, psychologists, physiotherapists and social workers, as well as your family doctor. Having so many people taking care of you can be a great comfort—but if something is bothering you, how do you know who to turn to?

Your family doctor might be the best person to help you sort this out, as they will have an understanding of the big picture. If you don't have a family doctor, ask someone in your cancer centre or healthcare team—such as an oncology nurse or a social worker—who you should talk to when you have a question about your symptoms or treatment, or another concern, such as your relationship with your children. Also, make sure you know how to contact them. Matching your question or concern with the right expert will help you get the support and information you need.

Tip 2. Prepare for your appointment

It's easy to forget what you want to ask or say if you're worried or nervous, or have many things to think about. It can also be difficult to remember all the details about how you've been feeling since your last appointment. A little preparation, however, can go a long way in how much you get out of your appointment. Below you will find some suggestions to prepare for your appointments.



Keep a symptom diary

For more information see [Symptom Diary](#).

The information you collect with a symptom diary will help your healthcare professional quickly understand your symptom better, and how to help you manage it. Try to be as detailed as possible with your descriptions.

Some typical details to think about include:

- How often do you experience the symptom?
- When did it start? Is it constant or does it come and go?
- Does anything make it feel better? Worse?
- How is it affecting you? Is it interfering with your everyday life?
- Do you think it's related to something that's happening in your life?
- Have you tried self-management strategies or therapies, such as physical therapy, for the problem?



Make a checklist

A question checklist is a great way to reduce anxiety about having to remember what you want to say. Preparing your list of questions ahead of time will also help you think about what you really want to know. And remember—there are no silly questions!

- List the questions that are most important to you first, in case you run out of time. You will have the chance to ask the other questions at your next appointment, if they still concern you.
- In between your appointments, you can use a notebook to keep track of questions that you'd like to ask as you think of them—and then prioritize them before your appointment.



Practice what you want to say

Practising what you want to say—and how you want to say it—ahead of time can help you get comfortable with your material, which can help reduce nerves.



Bring a notebook

It can be just as hard to remember everything your healthcare professional tells you as it is to remember what you want to ask! Taking notes will help you keep track of the answers to your questions and other important information, which you can refer to later.



Bring an audio recorder

If you don't feel that you would be able to take notes properly while you are talking, ask your healthcare professional if it would be alright to record the conversation. You can explain that it will help you understand and follow the advice better.



Take someone with you

If you think that even with a checklist, you will be nervous talking to your healthcare professional—or if you are feeling unwell at the time of your appointment and you know it will be hard for you to concentrate—arrange to bring a family member or friend with you. They can provide emotional support and help ask questions, listen and take notes.

Tip 3. Express yourself clearly and honestly

Be clear

When you are describing your symptoms or concerns, be as clear and specific as you can. Focus on the most important details first, to help your healthcare professional get a clear understanding of what is going on and identify possible solutions. Using a symptom diary can really help you in being clear.



Be honest

It is very important to be honest with your healthcare professional when you are discussing your symptoms and concerns. If you are having a lot of pain, don't say your pain is not bad. If something is worrying you, don't say everything is ok. Your healthcare professional needs a true and complete picture of what is going on with you, to be able to treat and support you in the best way possible. Being honest does not mean you are complaining—you are providing important information about your health and life.

Be open

It is not only important to share information about how treatment is affecting you physically—it is necessary to be open and honest about how it is affecting other areas of your life. If you are having problems with your everyday activities, work or relationships because of your treatment, this should be brought into the discussion as well. These details contribute to your healthcare professional's understanding of how you are coping with treatment, and could help with treatment options and decisions.

Tip 4. Ask for what you need

It can be difficult to ask for what you need, particularly in situations where you feel nervous or overwhelmed. When you talk to your healthcare professional about your cancer and treatment, it is normal to feel scared or confused about what you want to say. However, it is so important not to forget about what you need as you go through the cancer experience—and it is equally important that your healthcare professional understands what you need. If you are having difficulty speaking up for yourself in this way, try some of the following communication strategies.



In general

- Use “I” statements, such as “I think”, “I need”, “I want”, “I’d prefer” to express how you feel when making a point.
- If you are not comfortable disagreeing with, or challenging, a healthcare professional, soften your statements with phrases like:
 - “That seems like a good approach, but perhaps I could still look at other options.”
 - “I was thinking about this option – what do you think?”
 - “I really like this option, but your advice is important to me.”



If you need clarification

Medical appointments can be overwhelming and sometimes the amount of information you get can be hard to take in all at once. Healthcare professionals also often use jargon. If you don't understand something, don't be afraid to speak up! Not understanding what your healthcare professional has told you can affect your physical and mental wellbeing. It is better to get clarification in the moment than look things up on the internet later, and try to figure out what your healthcare professional meant. Try using some of the following tips and questions to help you get the information you need during your appointment.

- Ask more questions or simply say you didn't understand. Ask for diagrams or words to be spelled if you think this will help you.
 - Could you explain that again, using simpler words?
 - I didn't quite understand that – can you run it by me again?
 - Could you repeat that last part of what you just said?
 - Could you go over those instructions again please?
 - Can you clarify what you mean by...?
- Repeat what you heard—or think you heard—using your own words.
 - So you mean I should...?
 - Is it correct that you want me to...?
 - You want me to call you if ...?
 - I think you're telling me that I should...



If your healthcare professional doesn't acknowledge your concern

If your healthcare professional doesn't seem to have understood what you asked or described, don't be afraid to say it again. This is particularly important if something you are worried about gets brushed aside. Ask why they don't think this is important, don't just accept it.



If you want more information, or less

Make sure your healthcare professional understands your preferences about information regarding your condition and treatment. Everyone's desire for information is different, and it's important that your healthcare professional knows what your needs are.

- If you are the type of person who wants to know as much as possible, ask your healthcare professional to give you additional written information or direct you to reliable resources.
- If you need more information to make a decision, don't hesitate to ask for this.
- If too much information stresses you out and you only want to know the basics, be clear about that. This may include updates about your condition or test results.



If you want to be involved in decisions about treatment and care

Let your healthcare professional know if—and how much—you want to be involved in decisions about your treatment and care. Mention if you are worried about side effects or a particular treatment or medication that has been recommended. If you are interested in knowing about possible treatment options, bring this up. Also, let your healthcare professional know if you need more time to think about something before making a decision, or if you want to discuss it with them more. It is important to know that you are partnering with your healthcare professional in taking care of your health.



To find out what's next

Whatever was discussed in your appointment, always end the session by asking your healthcare professional "What happens next?" or "What's the next step?" Maybe you need to follow-up about test results or check in with your oncology nurse next week about how your pain medication is working—or maybe there's nothing for you to do until the next appointment. Whatever it is, you should leave your appointment feeling confident about your immediate future.

Resources

For more information on how to communicate with healthcare professionals, see [Communicating with your healthcare team](#).

Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- TEMPO. Telling the health care professionals what is going on.
- Coping-Together: Getting the Support You Need. Asking for help from the right health professional. August 2019.
- TEMPO. Knowing the role of the different health care professionals involved.
- TEMPO. Asking questions to the health care team.
- Coping-Together: Getting On Top of Symptoms. August 2019.
- TEMPO Having our main concerns addressed during appointments.
- TEMPO Knowing what to expect after a cancer diagnosis or treatment.
- Johns Hopkins Medicine. Don't Be Shy: 4 Tips for Talking to Your Doctor. June 2020.
- TEMPO Understanding what the health care professionals are telling us.
- TEMPO Telling the health care team which decisions we want.

Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or

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