Care at the end of life for advanced cancer patients

When to stop cancer treatment

When you have cancer and you have tried many treatments without success, it’s hard to know when to stop treatment. Sometimes, even with the best care, cancer continues to spread. It is hard to accept, but the best thing for you at that point may be to stop the cancer treatment. Instead, you could focus on getting care to keep you comfortable and out of pain.

This fact sheet explains how to know when it is time to stop treatment and focus on end-of-life care. You can use this information to talk with your doctor about your options and choose the best care for you.

Cancer responds best to treatment the first time. When you treat a tumor for the first time, there is hope that the treatment will destroy the cancer cells and keep them from returning. But if your tumor keeps growing, even with treatment, there is a lower chance that more treatment will help.

This is especially true for solid-tumor cancers, like breast, colon, and lung cancer, and sarcoma. Doctors know a lot about how these cancers grow or shrink over time and how they respond to treatment. They have found that treatment after treatment offers little or no benefit.

When is it time to think about stopping cancer treatment?

If you have had three different treatments and your cancer has grown or spread, more treatment usually will not help you feel better or increase your chance of living longer. Instead, more treatment could cause serious side effects that shorten your life and reduce the quality of the time you have left.

Still, almost half of people with advanced cancer keep getting chemotherapy—even when it has almost no chance of helping them. They end up suffering when they should not have to.
Questions to ask your doctor

Let your doctor know how much you want to know about your cancer, and when you are ready to talk about end-of-life care.

Ask your doctor:

- How long do I have to live if I have more treatment? What will happen if I do not have more treatment?
- What is the goal of more treatment? Will treatment stop or slow my cancer, or will it help with the symptoms?
- What is the best way to manage my symptoms and side effects?
- Are there things I can do to make my quality of life better?
- Should I meet with someone who knows about hospice care?

If you would like to know more about hospice care:

- Ask your doctor for a referral to hospice. Or to learn more go to www.cancer.net/coping/end-life-care/hospice-care.
- You can talk to hospice without having to sign up. And, even if you decide to be on hospice care, you can always change your mind.