

CANCER CARE

Navigating the World of Cancer



SARAH YOUNG

A diagnosis of cancer creates shock, fear, and anxiety: What now? Your life shifts dramatically and you feel derailed from your path. Even at stage 1 or 2, the word cancer has so much associated with it, a sense of alienation and loss of power may ensue. Understanding your treatment options and what resources are available will be a daunting task

In this new reality, it is as if you have been dropped out at sea on a dingy with just a life preserver and you suddenly have to paddle from one continent to the other. You may face sharks, stormy weather, enormous waves, dehydration, severe sunburn and feeling utterly lost. What would help is a compass, proper clothing, fishing gear, a GPS, a water desalination tank, and a crash course in seafaring. A cancer diagnosis may leave you feeling the same way. Learn the tools of cancer navigation to gain the support you need at the right time.

UNDERSTAND THE TERMINOLOGY

Faced with this huge health shift, familiarize yourself with your diagnosis, prognosis and what treatment options are available to you. If you do not fully understand your diagnosis or some of the aspects that come with it, including grade, stage, and a wide array of other specialization terms, then make sure you ask for more information until you understand the situation to your comfort level. The health care system can be overwhelming as you are shuttled from one hospital wing to another with further tests and visits with people you have never met who are often in a great rush. Remember that health care practitioners in Canada are paid through the public purse and you can ask questions and understand your choices.

These choices include conventional care - surgery, chemotherapy and radiation; complementary care, which is nutrition, exercise, lifestyle modifications, mind body work, and natural therapies; and integrative care options which is the best of both worlds. Knowing these choices, figure out what each means relative to your own definition of health.

BUILD YOUR CANCER CARE TEAM



Typically you go through conventional treatments passively, as you are not in control and things are being done to you. You may be informed you need surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy. However, there are many ways that you can take more control to improve your health while undergoing conventional treatments.

Put together a team of integrated care specialists to support you as you undergo treatments. Depending on your circumstances, you may need a counsellor to help you cope emotionally and spiritually, you may need a nutritionist to improve your eating habits, an acupuncturist to control pain, a naturopathic doctor to reduce the side effects of conventional treatments, to help you with your lifestyle shifts, and an exercise therapist to put together a proper exercise program. These professionals, alongside your conventional medical team at the hospital, can work together to make sure you navigate well through your experience.

Build a personal support network. Whether it is calling on a couple of close friends or family to help with household duties or simply to get to and from treatments, make sure to make these requests explicitly. You cannot do this alone and you need

a solid team of helpers outside the medical realm.

LOCAL RESOURCES

Ottawa has a wide range of exemplary options that have come about in the past few years. There is state of the art care at the newly expanded Cancer Centres at the General and Queensway Carleton. You can become a member of the Maplesoft Survivorship Centre and have access to workshops and cancer coaching. You can become a patient at the Ottawa OICC where integrative medicine therapies can be combined with conventional treatments at the Cancer Centre to bridge the best of both worlds. Request a referral to the Psycho-Social Oncology Program at the Ottawa Hospital or request a referral to the Bruyere palliative care eight week rehabilitation program. You can join one of the many local cancer associations, or engage the services of the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC), Comfort Keepers, Bayshore Home Health and Maycourt for more advanced and potentially end of life care.

MAKE THE RIGHT DECISIONS

Up against the most challenging health scare of your life, you need to make important decisions about what treatments to do, what other therapies to look into, whether your oncologist is supportive of your choices and how to make the right decisions. Learn how to communicate effectively with your doctors and how to advocate for yourself. If need be, consider a second opinion.

Feeling good about your choices is essential to a good outcome. Developing a framework for decision-making is key and may require that you enlist professional help to make the proper decisions. By learning the terminology, building a solid cancer care team, creating a good support network, and knowing all the resources available to you in the Ottawa region, you will learn to navigate this alien world to create the best possible outcome for your health.

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