

Dear Friends and Caregivers,

As the caregiver of a cancer patient, you may find yourself assisting your friend or loved one in a variety of ways, such as meal preparation, transportation to medical appointments, helping with medication, bathing, and dressing. Your presence and support make you a vital part of the treatment team.

Here are a few additional recommendations that might make your caregiving easier and more effective throughout the treatment process:

Ask and Listen

First and foremost, ask your friend or loved one how you can best support him or her. A frank and heartfelt conversation about what you both see as the patient's greatest needs will help you both work together for the best care and experience possible.

Throughout your conversation, be sure and touch on all the ways cancer may impact the patient's life: physically, emotionally, mentally, financially, socially, spiritually, and practically. If necessary, help your loved one make plans for dealing with needs, issues, or concerns that may arise in each of these areas. Identify questions to ask, resources that are needed, and people that can help. If it works for both of you, take notes or make spoken agreements, which may be helpful to refer to later on.

Understand the Treatment

Get permission from the patient to come along on healthcare team visits whenever treatment is being discussed. Never be shy to ask questions and come with a list of questions ready to ask. Learn the language of cancer treatment. When the healthcare team presents treatment options for the patient, they may use terms that are unfamiliar to you. After the patient is aware of all the options, you can assist him or her in choosing the right treatment.

Ask About Clinical Trials

While learning about treatment options, you may hear the term "clinical trials" mentioned. If a clinical trial is an option, make sure your friend or loved one gets all the details about the benefits and risks of the clinical trial. Again, perhaps you can help your loved one decide if this is right for him or her by having a frank and open discussion of the possibilities.

Provide Encouragement

You can be a great aid to your friend or loved one by encouraging and supporting him or her to take the best possible care of their health prior to, during, and after treatment. Before treatment, if possible, encourage the patient to stop smoking if he or she is a smoker. Encourage the patient to continue a current activity program, or add activity to the daily routine, as appropriate – and with physician guidance. Review the nutrition needs and help your loved one get the healthy, appetizing food that can maintain strength and well-being. Finally, if the patient needs dental work, take care of this before starting therapy. Please note that nutrition, activities, and overall patient care should always be facilitated in conjunction with the guidance of a healthcare professional.

Ask About Side Effects

No two people react to chemotherapy side effects the same way. As a caregiver, you can help your friend or loved one explore his or her treatment options and the potential side effects that may result. Be sure to carefully review the various treatment options and their anticipated side effects with your healthcare team.

Care for the Caregiver

Caring for a person with cancer can put such pressures on you that you neglect your own well-being. While people living with cancer often get together in support groups, caregivers often feel they need to carry their emotional burdens alone.

Many familiar things in your life may change as a result of caring for a friend or loved one with cancer. You may need to assume different tasks at home or at work. Demands on your time can pull you in many directions. Communicating with children, family members, and concerned friends can be especially challenging, and financial pressures may weigh upon you.

It is therefore important to remember that you can't provide support to someone else if you're exhausted, stressed out, or burned out. Taking time for rest, exercise, good nutrition, socializing, and your spiritual needs will help you provide the support you wish to give to your loved one. Be willing to share your feelings and concerns with friends and family members, and seek the help you need through support groups within your community. Listings of caregiver support groups can often be found through cancer advocacy organizations, such as local chapters of the American Cancer Society, along with physicians' offices and hospitals, churches, and civic organizations.