Article Series Terms & Education

Understanding the Members of Your Care Team and Their Roles

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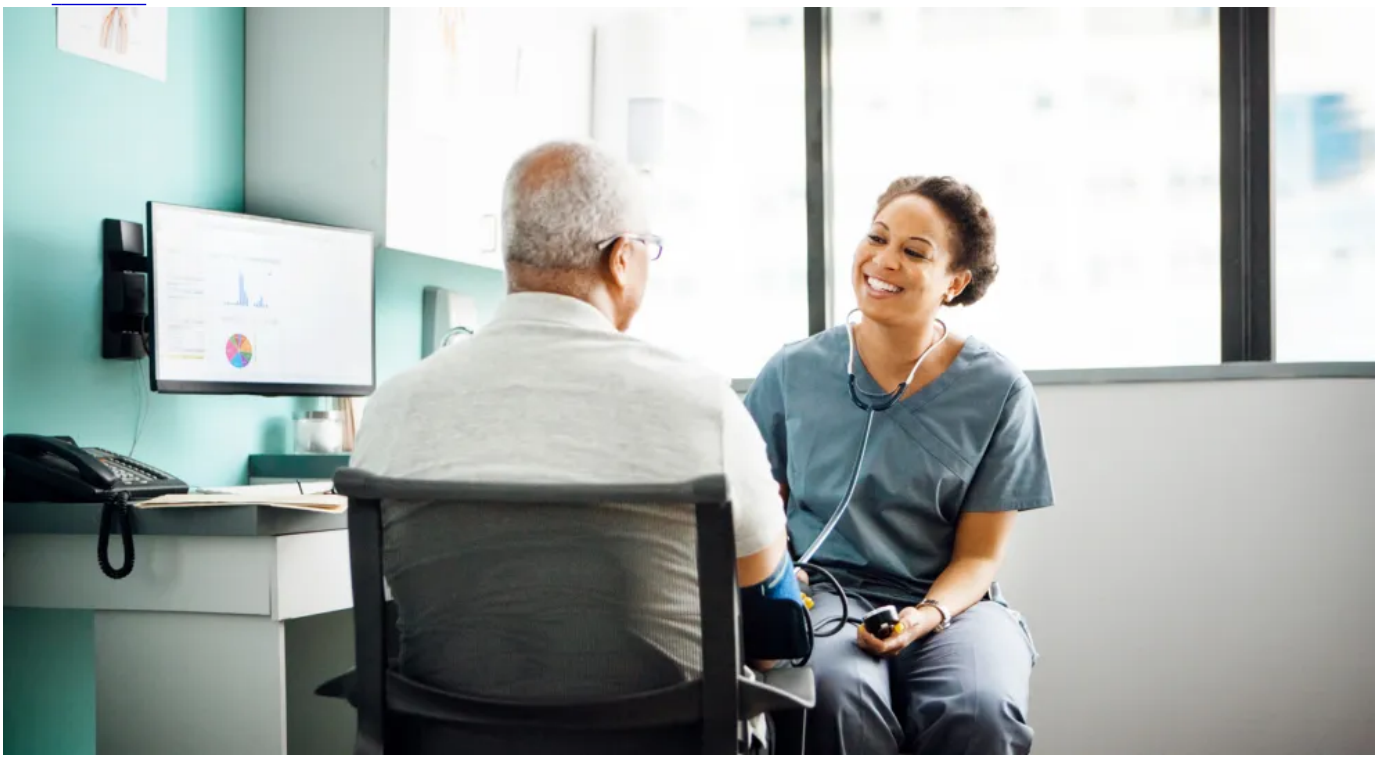

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As part of your journey with cancer, it is common to have a team of health professionals who work together on your care plan – this is called a care team. Each member of your care team has a unique role and responsibility based on their skills and experiences. Understanding the role that each of your care team members play and how they work together may help you understand your cancer care plan and how to best address certain problems as they arise. The following are some people

who may be part of your care team. This is not a complete list of team members, as a care team may vary from person to person given everyone’s cancer is different.

Care team members

- **Doctors**
    - During your cancer journey, you may come across several doctors who specialize in different aspects of care.
    - Oncologists are doctors who specialize in diagnosing and treating cancers.
        - An oncologist will typically be the leader of your care team and will meet and work closely with the other team members on developing your care plan.
        - You may need a special type of oncologist or even more than one kind of oncologist during your cancer care.
    - Depending on the type of cancer you have, you may need an oncologist that provides care for your specific cancer type, such as:
        - A gynecologic oncologist, who are experts in treating cancers of the female reproductive system.
        - A hematologic oncologist, who are experts in treating various types of blood cancers.
    - There are also other oncologists who are experts in specific aspects of cancer treatment who you may come across, such as:
        - A surgical oncologist, who are experts in performing surgery to treat cancer.
        - A radiation oncologist, who are experts in treating cancer with radiation therapy.
    - Other doctors who are not oncologists may also be part of your care team, depending on if you have other pre-existing conditions or if you develop conditions that require care during your cancer journey. These may include:
        - A primary care provider, who is a doctor that you would typically see when a symptom or problem arises. You may continue seeing your primary care provider during your cancer journey.

        - A cardiologist, who is a doctor that specializes in the heart and blood vessels. You may see a cardiologist if you also have and/or develop a condition related to the heart.
        - A psychiatrist, who is a doctor that treats mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. Psychiatrists may provide counseling or other treatments.
        - A urologist, who is a doctor that treats problems of the urinary tract and male reproductive tract. You may see a urologist if you have a condition or problems related the urinary or male reproductive tract.

- **Oncology nurses**

    - Oncology nurses are nurses who specialize in treating and caring for those with cancer.
    - They provide medical care, such as administering medicine or monitoring side effects, and they may also answer questions and offer support.
    - You may come across nurses during both inpatient and outpatient care depending on your care plan.

- **Pharmacists**

    - Pharmacists help make sure that the treatments and medicines prescribed are safe and effective.
    - They may also help you understand more about the drugs your taking, such as how to properly take them, side effects, or certain foods to avoid.

- **Patient navigator**

    - A patient navigator may help guide you through the healthcare system. This may include providing support during diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care.
    - Patient navigator programs may work through hospitals or other organizations. These services may differ.
    - Patient navigators may be people with special training, like a social worker.
        - Social workers may help in coordinating and providing help and resources for you and your family, such as counseling on finances,

housing or childcare.
    - Patient navigators may also be healthcare professionals, like a nurse.
        - The Academy of Oncology Nurse and Patient Navigators (AONN) is one of the largest networks for patient navigation in cancer care.

- **Supportive care**

    - A person living with cancer may have a supportive care team to help them navigate their diagnosis and improve their quality of life. This type of care may include physical, social, psychological or spiritual support. Supportive care team members may include:
        - A dietitian, who may help you find foods that are healthy and easy to eat during your cancer care.
        - A psychologist, who may provide counseling and mental health services, including recommendations for patient and caregiver support groups.
        - A physical therapist, who may teach you exercises that may help you gain strength and improve movement after treatment.
        - A spiritual counselor, who may provide support in coping with spiritual issues during your cancer journey. This may be a hospital chaplain or your own religious/spiritual leader.

- **Caregivers**

    - A caregiver is a person who may help you the most often during your cancer journey. This may include a partner, family member or close friend.
    - Caregivers often help in arranging your cancer care and managing your needs, such as keeping track of medicines, attending appointments and letting other members of the care team know how you're doing.
    - Caregivers may often need support as well. Organizations like American Cancer Society and National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship may be able to provide resources for caregiver support.

There are many care team members that all work together to help provide cancer care that is best fit for you. It is important that you feel comfortable with the people on your cancer care team and know how they may help with your cancer care. If

you are ever unsure of a care team member’s role in your overall care plan, consider asking them what part of your cancer journey they will be helping with.