Article Series Preparing for Appointments

7 Questions to Ask After An Early Onset Cancer Diagnosis

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Early onset cancer –– often defined as cancer diagnosed in adults younger than 50 –– can come as a shock. You may feel alarmed when you first hear the news, and it can be difficult to know what to focus on first.

Many individuals who are diagnosed with early onset cancer experience feelings of isolation and fears around life disruption, as well as a feeling of overwhelm around

the health care system and finding psychosocial support.

Asking the right questions can help you navigate this challenging time, reduce stress and make more informed decisions.

Here are 7 questions that may be helpful to discuss with your healthcare provider. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

1. **What is the specific type and stage of cancer?**
2. **Will my treatement plan affect my career goals?**
3. **How will this diagnosis affect my ability to raise my children?**
4. **Will this diagnosis affect my ability to have children?**
5. **How will this diagnosis potentially affect my next steps in life?**

Knowing what type of cancer you have can help you get the information you need and make informed decisions about your treatment options. Knowing the stage of the cancer is also important. The cancer’s stage is determined by tumor size, tumor location, and whether or not the cancer has spread.

Getting into conversations about treatment can feel daunting, especially if you have big career aspirations that may need to be placed on the backburner for now. Ask your healthcare provider about what the timeline for treatment may look like, and how it may affect your work life. You may want to discuss flexible working arrangements with your employer, or talk to your company’s HR department about taking some time off during treatment.

If you’re a parent, you may be worried about how you’ll balance childcare responsibilities and parenting duties during cancer treatment. Talk to your doctor about how your diagnosis may affect your ability to raise your kids, and consider reaching out to your kids’ school to tell them what’s going on so they can support you. Family and friends may be happy to help assist with things like taking your kids to school or picking them up from activities if you’re not able to do so.

Some cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, can affect the reproductive health of both women and men. Radiation, for example, may affect the uterus (womb) in women or block the tubes that sperm travels through in men. Some other cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy or immunotherapy, may damage eggs or disrupt hormones.

So, if you are of reproductive age and have been diagnosed with cancer, you may have questions about your fertility and family planning – such as what the likelihood is that you'll have fertility problems, and what your options are. Many people who are diagnosed with early-onset cancers do not discuss fertility preservation options, and although the conversation may feel daunting, it's an important one to have. Your healthcare provider may suggest egg freezing or sperm freezing, or embryo cryopreservation or radiation shielding.

Most young people are concerned about graduating college, starting a job, getting married, or beginning a family –– and a cancer diagnosis can throw a wrench in those plans. Many also feel stressed about the financial toll of treatment, and how that will impact their future goals and plans. If you're panicking about how your diagnosis will affect the big milestones in your life, talk to your doctor about the timeline of your treatment plan and how you can still celebrate life's milestones with cancer. Remind yourself that it's normal to feel a sense of sadness or stress about what's coming next, and try to lean on family and friends for support during this time.

6. **Can I talk to another young person who has had cancer?**

7. **Should I get a second opinion?**

It's completely normal to want to connect with someone your age who is going through –– or has gone through –– something similar. Ask your healthcare provider if they know of any local support groups or networks that can connect you with individuals who can relate to your experience. Many cancer centers throughout the US provide supportive services for young people living with cancer, and looking into that option may help you develop a support circle and get some of the answers you're looking for.

Whether to seek a second opinion is a personal decision, but most doctors support patients who seek additional advice. Second opinions for cancer can help you to confirm a diagnosis, explore alternative treatment options, have your options explained by someone else, and provide greater peace of mind about your care.

Second opinions may also be helpful if you have doubts about your diagnosis or treatment plan, want more information about risks and benefits, or if you have a rare or aggressive form of cancer with limited treatment options.

Here are some Microsteps that may help you feel more prepared for your next doctor's appointment:

Listing a few priority questions for the appointment.

If you have a long list of questions, highlight which are most important for you to get answered today in case you don't have time to go through all of them in one appointment.

Bringing a trusted friend or family member with you.

Having a loved one with you can be a great way to feel a sense of support and have someone else to advocate for you. It can also be a good way to remember the information you are told and have someone to talk to about it afterwards.

Bringing a pad of paper and a pen with you.

Taking some notes at your appointment can help you remember the information you've been told and have it in writing for future reference.

Asking for clarification if you don't understand something.

You may be new to conversations around cancer and care, and it's completely normal if you don't understand something. Asking for clarity with follow-up questions can help you get the answers you need and leave feeling reassured.

Requesting contact information before you leave.

Make sure to ask for a phone number or email at the end of your appointment in case you have follow-up questions later.

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