

COMMUNICATING AS A CAREGIVER

Communicating with the Patient

Communication is key when it comes to caring for a cancer patient. You and your loved one will need to be open and honest with each other from the start. Remember that you are both on the same team and hope for the best outcome. At some point, you will likely have disagreements and maybe even fight, but making it a priority to keep the lines of communication open and setting boundaries and expectations early on will make things easier.

What to Say and What Not to Say

You're not alone if you're not sure what to say to someone who has cancer, even if the person is someone you love. Sometimes the simplest expressions of concern are the most meaningful. And, sometimes, just listening is the best thing you can do.

Make sure you speak from the heart. For instance, you might say something like:

“ I don't know what to say, but I want you to know I care.”

“ I'm here for you when and if you need me.”

“ I'd like to help. What can I pick up for you at the grocery store?”

“ Do you need a ride to or from appointments?”

While it's usually a good idea to be encouraging, it's also important not to tell people with cancer to “always stay positive.” This may seem to discount your loved ones' legitimate fears, concerns or sad feelings. It's also tempting to say that you know how your loved one feels. While you do understand that they are going through a difficult time, no one can know exactly how any

one person with cancer feels.

Be careful when bringing up a cancer patient's physical appearance. Cancer brings with it a lot of physical changes—hair loss, weight loss, weight gain, skin changes, and swelling. Cancer patients often struggle with body image and may be embarrassed or sensitive about the changes to their bodies. You may want to tell your loved one that they look great, but it may not come across as the compliment that you intended. For example, weight loss for cancer patients is often a side effect of cancer and treatment, so a compliment on weight loss may come across as insensitive.

It may not be a good idea to share stories about family members or friends who have had cancer. Every person is different, and these stories may not help, especially if the friend or family member has passed away. Instead, let your loved one know that you're familiar with cancer because you've been through it with someone else. Then your loved one can take the conversation from there.

Humor can be an important way of dealing with cancer. Let the person with cancer take the lead. It's healthy to find humor in difficult situations. Laughter can be a great way to relieve stress. If your loved one makes a joke about the situation, you can laugh with them. However, you never want to joke unless you know the person with cancer can handle it and will appreciate the humor.

Respect Your Loved One's Privacy

As the caregiver, you may become your loved one's “gatekeeper” as friends and family reach out to express concern or ask for updates. Ask your loved one who they plan to tell about the cancer diagnosis and how much they want to share. Some

TIP

Caregiving can be a difficult job, so it's natural to want to talk about what you are going through, too. If your loved one wants to keep the diagnosis private, find someone you can talk to in confidence such as a member of a caregiver support group or a therapist.



patients prefer to keep their diagnosis private, especially in the beginning. If your loved one does not want people to know, respect their wishes.

Be careful about what you post on social media. Even if your loved one shares the diagnosis with friends or family, they may not want to share the diagnosis with acquaintances, co-workers or classmates. Even private social media profiles may not be as private as you think. Do not post on social media about your loved one's diagnosis without their approval.

Be Aware of Cognitive Issues

Cancer patients sometimes experience cognitive issues, often referred to as “chemo brain,” as a side effect of treatment. Your loved one may become forgetful, have trouble concentrating or seem confused at times. Be patient and understanding. If your loved one is struggling to remember things, suggest writing a to-do list, setting alarms on a mobile phone, or ask if it's okay for you to remind them to take medication or carry out other tasks.



Use the **Daily Medication Log** worksheet to keep track of the medications the patient takes each day.

Questions for Caregivers to Ask Their Loved Ones

What will your role as caregiver include? Set some parameters and boundaries early. Try not to make assumptions about what your loved one needs or wants. Find out what works best for both you and your loved one.

Here are some questions you can ask your loved one to establish parameters. Go through the following questions together and record the answers:

Are you okay with the healthcare team sharing your medical information with me?

Yes No Other _____

If your loved one answers Yes to this question, they will need to sign paperwork at the treatment center to give the healthcare team permission to communicate with you.

Who will be the main contact person for the healthcare team? _____

Who will schedule the appointments? _____

What do you need or want help with? Check all that apply. Add additional tasks or parameters, as needed.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going to appointments | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Booking appointments | <input type="checkbox"/> Household chores |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking to members of the healthcare team | <input type="checkbox"/> Pet care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Remembering medication | <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery shopping | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing health insurance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hygiene and personal care (bathing, dressing, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing finances |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Updating friends and loved ones | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | |

What do you not need or want help with?

What is a good way to keep the lines of communication open? Ask your loved one to let you know when they need space or begins to feel overwhelmed.

Are you okay with me sharing updates about your treatment or well-being with other family members and friends? And, if so, in what format—phone, email, caregiver app or Web page, social media?

Do you have an advanced directive/will/power of attorney/living will/healthcare proxy? Where can I find copies of these documents? Do any of them need to be updated?

Keep the conversation ongoing. As treatment progresses, you may need to revisit the parameters you set. Before you assume that something is the right thing to do, ask if your loved one would like you to take over a responsibility. For example, a patient may generally feel well enough to manage household chores, but may need an extra hand during the few days following a chemotherapy infusion.



To Update or Create New Parameters, use the worksheet titled **Questions for Caregivers to Ask Their Loved Ones**

Remember, cancer may mean the loss of your loved one's independence in many ways. Your loved one may resist your care at times and attempt to maintain their sense of independence and normalcy. Try not to take any resistance personally.

Relationship Changes

Managing a relationship with a patient may be one of the more unexpected challenges of caregiving. Your relationship with your loved one may change as you transition into your new roles as caregiver and patient, changing your day-to-day life and the dynamics of your relationship. Here are few examples of caregiver/patient relationships and some of the issues that may arise.

Possible Challenges

All relationships are different so the challenges you face may also be different. In the following section, read about possible challenges, by relationship type. Considering these potential challenges in advance may prepare you for any future issues and allow you to take action now to prevent problems.

Caring For Your Spouse or Significant Other

You and your spouse likely view your relationship as an equal partnership, but a cancer diagnosis may change that dynamic. If your loved one has to stop working for treatment or is not able to

TIP

Don't forget to seek help for yourself. Caregivers often push their own needs aside, but you can't care for someone else if you don't take care of yourself too. Reach out to the members of the healthcare team for suggestions, visit your own doctor or call your insurance company for recommendations.



help with daily chores, they may feel guilty for not contributing. If you have children, extra childcare responsibilities may also fall on you.

Cancer can also create challenges to intimacy. Treatments for cancer can cause changes in sexual desire and function. Some patients feel less attractive or desirable when their physical appearance changes or they are not feeling well. All of these issues can build barriers to intimacy. If you are a caregiver for a romantic partner, know that sex and intimacy may change after a cancer diagnosis. Rethink what intimacy means to both of you. Gently encourage your loved one to reach out to the healthcare team for help with any physical issues affecting intimacy, such as decreased desire, pain with intercourse, vaginal dryness or erectile dysfunction.

Infertility is a side effect of some cancer treatments. If you and your partner hope to have children in the future, talk to members of the healthcare team before treatment begins. You may have options to preserve fertility, such as egg, embryo, or sperm banking.

It is advisable for you or your loved one to ask the healthcare team if it is safe to engage in sexual activity and inquire whether any extra precautions need to be taken because of treatment or side

effects. For example, if the patient is at risk for bleeding issues due to a low platelet count, the individual may need to refrain from sex until platelet numbers improve. If the patient is receiving radioimmunotherapy treatment, you may need to take precautions to prevent exposure to radiation. (With external beam radiation therapy, people in contact with the patient, such as the caregiver, will not be exposed to any radiation.)

If you continue to have sex during the patient's treatment, be sure to use appropriate birth control. Since cancer treatment can compromise the immune system, use condoms to protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Caring For a Parent

When you are caring for a parent, the role reversal may feel odd at first. For most of your life, your parent may have filled the caregiver role in your relationship. Your parent may be reluctant to accept care and not want to be a burden.

If you have young children yourself, your co-parent may need to take on more childcare responsibility while you are looking after your own parent, which could lead to feelings of resentment.

Caring For an Adult Child

If you are a parent caring for an adult child who has a cancer diagnosis, remember that the patient is an adult. You must respect their decisions regarding treatment. Providing care for your child may feel natural for you, but if your son or daughter had been living independently prior to the diagnosis, being dependent on the care of a parent again may feel particularly frustrating.

Caring For a Child

When caring for a child with cancer, your relationships with others may be strained, especially with your co-parent. You may not always agree on what is best for your child. You may feel at times as if your co-parent isn't taking on a fair

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share of the added workload involved in taking care of a sick child. If you have more than one child, siblings may feel left out, confused by, or resentful of the attention that the child with cancer receives from you and others. In addition, the child with cancer may have different caregiving needs depending on their age and stage of development. Teens and preteens may want a more active role in their care planning, as well as more independence.

*If your child has cancer, see the section titled **When Your Child Has Cancer to learn more about managing a child's diagnosis and treatment.***

Managing Relationship Issues

Early and ongoing communication is the best way to deal with relationship issues. Be aware of your feelings, the patient's feelings and the feelings of those around you. Address any problems as soon as possible. If you are struggling with relationship issues, keep in mind that you are not alone, and these feelings are normal.

If relationship issues persist, it may help to speak to a therapist. Ask members of the healthcare team or the patient's or your health insurance provider for a recommendation.



TIP

Some cancer support organizations have professionals who specialize in helping children affected by a parent's cancer. They can provide helpful guidance for age-appropriate conversations. www.tellingkidsaboutcancer.com is one example. See the resource section for others.

Take Care of Your Mental Health and the Mental Health of Others

A cancer diagnosis is difficult to cope with for all involved—the patient, the caregiver and other family members. Feelings of anxiety and depression are common.

When is it time to seek professional help? If these feelings start to interfere with daily activities, you, other family members, or your loved one may need individual counseling from a medical professional.

Reach out to members of the healthcare team if you, another family member or your loved one is experiencing any of the following on a persistent basis:

- ▶ Ongoing sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- ▶ Loss of interest or pleasure in most activities

- ▶ Major weight loss or weight gain as well as other changes in appearance
- ▶ Agitation or restlessness
- ▶ Fatigue or no energy
- ▶ Trouble sleeping or sleeping excessively
- ▶ Trouble focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- ▶ Feeling worthless, guilty or helpless
- ▶ Thoughts of death or suicide – this needs to be addressed with a professional immediately

Children can also be affected. Additional signs to watch for in children include angry outbursts, nightmares or poor grades in school.



Learn more about self-care in the section titled **Caring For Yourself**

Telling Children About a Loved One's Diagnosis

Talking to children about the cancer diagnosis of someone they love can be intimidating. You may worry about what to say or what not to say. You may even wish to protect children by not telling them about the cancer diagnosis; however, children are very perceptive. Even young children may be able to tell that something is wrong. Children will use their imagination and fill in the gaps of information. Children do best with age-appropriate information shared with them by a trusted adult.

Make a Plan to Talk to Children

Before talking to children, prepare what you will say in advance. If you are talking to your own children or to your loved one's children, make sure that you and your partner or you and the person with cancer are on the same page about what and how to tell the children. Talk to children in a comfortable space and at a time when you will not be interrupted. Remain as calm as possible when you are talking to children.

Try to anticipate questions and consid-

er your answers. Answer questions as honestly as possible, keeping in mind age-appropriate details. Encourage the child to ask questions and to come to you with any additional questions or worries in the future.

You may need to have multiple conversations with young children. Children need time to absorb information and can only take in so much new information at one time. You may want to provide basic information at first and then check in with the child later to answer questions and provide additional information.

You may also want to check in with the child's teachers, coaches, babysitters or other adults who play a role in your child's life.

Remember, you are not alone when it comes to talking to kids about cancer. Ask for input from members of the healthcare team, school counselor or nurse, therapist, or other parents who have gone through a similar situation. There are also children's books which address this topic.

Age-Appropriate Discussion

Keep the discussion age appropriate when you talk to children about cancer. Consider the following guidelines by age.

Baby/Toddler (0 to 3 years)

- ▶ Children this young do not have an understanding of illness or cancer. However, they are aware of changes to routines and the feelings of people around them.
- ▶ Children may feel separation anxiety and need physical and verbal reassurance.
- ▶ You may notice changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or tantrums in response to the changes in their environment.

Preschool/Kindergarten (4 to 6 years)

- ▶ Children in this age-group may have an understanding of illness but not understand the implications of a serious illness, such as cancer. It may be especially confusing to the child if the person diagnosed does not look or act sick.
- ▶ Reassure the child that no one did anything to cause the cancer, neither the child nor the person with cancer.
- ▶ Explain to the child that cancer is not contagious.
- ▶ As with younger children, a preschooler or kindergarten child may experience separation anxiety so reassure the child and give advanced warning either if you or the cancer patient will be away.
- ▶ You may see signs of regression in a child's behavior, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting or tantrums.
- ▶ A child may use play to process the information, play-acting doctor/patient scenarios, for example.
- ▶ If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child's daily routine, explain it to them ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect. Inform the child's teacher so that they can also understand changes in routine.
- ▶ Explain, in advance, any physical changes that your child might notice about the cancer patient, such as hair loss, scars or unfamiliar medical equipment.

Elementary/Middle School (7 to 12 years)

- ▶ Children in this age-group may have a better understanding of serious illness, but not specifically cancer.
- ▶ The child may hear things about cancer from school, friends, TV or have found information on the Internet. Ask your child what they already know about cancer. If you encounter any misunderstandings, correct them using straightforward, clear statements such as "You can't catch cancer from another person" and "No one did anything wrong to cause the cancer diagnosis."
- ▶ Explain that "cancer" is a broad term that covers many different types of cancer. It may be helpful to talk to the child about the specific diagnosis of their loved one.
- ▶ If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child's daily routine, explain the changes ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect.
- ▶ Explain, in advance, any physical and emotional changes that your child may notice in the loved one as a result of treatment.
- ▶ Children in this age-group may also show signs of regression or separation anxiety.
- ▶ Children in this age-group may hide their feelings. Try to check in with the child and keep an eye out for signs of depression, such as ongoing feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, trouble focusing, problems sleeping, angry outbursts, or issues in school. If you recognize any of these, consider seeking professional help for your child.
- ▶ Inform your child's teachers, principal, school therapist, and/or guidance counselor of the diagnosis. Reach out to your child's school counselor or pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behavior.

High School/Teenagers(13 to 18 years)

- ▶ Teenagers most likely have a good understanding of cancer, but you may still need to correct some misunderstanding heard at school, from friends, on TV, or information they found on the Internet. It may be helpful to explain the cancer patient's specific diagnosis instead of just using the word "cancer."
- ▶ Having a loved one with cancer may lead teenagers to think more seriously about death and the meaning of life.
- ▶ Teenagers may experience a wide array of emotions but not share their feelings with their parents. It is developmentally appropriate for teens to seek out their peers to confide in rather than parents.
- ▶ Teenagers may also act out or engage in risky behaviors, such as drinking, drug use, or sex.
- ▶ Watch for the signs of depression listed in the section titled Relationship Changes
- ▶ Inform your child's teachers, principal, school therapist, and/or guidance counselor of the diagnosis. Reach out to your child's school counselor or pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behavior.
- ▶ Teenagers may want to help with caregiving duties. Allow teens to help, as appropriate, but do not put too much responsibility on their shoulders.

For more information on talking to children about cancer, visit:

Telling Kids About Cancer: www.tellingkidsaboutcancer.com/AgeAppropriateAdvice
CancerCare: www.cancer.org/tagged/child

Communicating with Members of the Healthcare Team

The patient's team of doctors, nurses and social workers can offer crucial support and encouragement as you help your loved one through cancer treatment. Your relationship with the members of the healthcare team can make navigating the challenges of cancer treatment easier.

Who Makes Up the Healthcare Team?

A number of healthcare professionals will be involved with your loved one's care. Not all cancer patients will need support from every type of healthcare professional mentioned in the list below. Based on your loved one's need, the team may include:

Doctors

- ▶ **Oncologists** — doctors who treat patients with cancer
- ▶ **Hematologist-oncologists** — doctors specially trained to diagnose and treat patients with blood cancers
- ▶ **Gynecologic oncologist** — doctors

specially trained to diagnose, operate on and treat patients with gynecologic cancers

- ▶ **Radiation oncologists** — doctors who treat patients with cancer using radiation therapy
- ▶ **Radiologists** — doctors trained to read and interpret imaging studies, such as a computed tomography (CT) scan or a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan
- ▶ **Radiology or lab technicians** — professionals who take images of the patient's body or draw blood samples
- ▶ **Pathologists** — doctors who identify diseases by studying cells and tissues using microscopes
- ▶ **General surgeons** — doctors who perform surgical procedures, such as splenectomies, lymph node biopsies and other tissue biopsies
- ▶ **Cardiologists** — doctors who specialize in heart disease

Nurses

- ▶ **Oncology nurses** — nurses who specialize in treating people who have

cancer

- ▶ **Nurse practitioners** — nurses who have advanced training in diagnosing and treating illness
- ▶ **Oncology nurse navigators** — nurses who specialize in cancer and help patients find appropriate resources


Additional Members of the Healthcare Team

- ▶ **Physician assistants** — health care providers who practice medicine in collaboration or under indirect supervision of a physician; often serve as a patient's principal contact on the health care team
- ▶ **Psychiatrists** — medical doctors who address mental health issues; can prescribe medications; focus on medication management as a course of treatment.
- ▶ **Psychologists** — mental health professionals who focus on therapy as well as cognitive and behavioral interventions; in most states, they are unable to prescribe medication.

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- ▶ **Social workers** — licensed mental health professionals who are trained to talk with patients and their families about their emotional or practical needs and help them with coping skills
- ▶ **Child life specialists** — pediatric healthcare professionals who can help children and their families cope with serious illnesses, such as cancer
- ▶ **Financial counselors** — advisors at the hospital or treatment center who can help people with hospital bills and insurance claims as well as work with individuals who are unable to pay their bills
- ▶ **Registered dietitians/nutritionists** — healthcare professionals who specializes in food and nutrition.

Make sure you keep track of all the contact information for each member of your loved one’s healthcare team.

 Use the Worksheet entitled **Healthcare Team Contact List** to keep track of important information.



TIP

Today many treatment centers provide a web-based “patient portal.”

Ask members of the healthcare team for how to access and navigate the patient portal.

Through the patient portal you may be able to access medical records, schedule appointments, message a provider, make payments and more.

At Appointments

Your loved one’s appointments are the best time to speak with members of the healthcare team. It’s normal to feel nervous and worry that you and/or your loved one will forget to ask an important question during an appointment. Good preparation can improve your comfort level and can make you feel more satisfied with doctor visits overall.

The following tips will help you to better communicate with members of the healthcare team during your loved one’s appointments:

- ▶ Write down your questions. Number your concerns in order of importance, asking the most important questions first. Let the doctor know you have a list so that they can set some time aside during the appointment to respond to your questions.
- ▶ Take notes. Write down the doctor’s answers to your questions and any other important information that you or your loved one needs to remember. Notes can include the names of the members of the healthcare team, dates and times of future appointments, and when and how your loved one should be taking prescribed medicines. After the appointment, summarize your notes and share them with your loved one and any other caregivers.
- ▶ An alternative to taking notes is to ask the doctor if you can record the conversation so you can listen to it again later.
- ▶ Ask for written information about the patient’s diagnosis, treatment plan and lab results. Keep everything in one place. This way, nothing gets lost, and you always know where to find the information.
- ▶ Share this information with all the healthcare professionals your loved one sees for any health reason, and encourage the healthcare professionals to talk with each other to ensure the most comprehensive care.
- ▶ Ask for written information about any side effects or symptoms and ask how you will know if you will need to contact the doctor about them immediately or if you should go directly to the emergency room.
- ▶ Encourage your loved one to tell the doctor about any symptoms or side effects.
- ▶ Ask the doctor to slow down or explain things in another way if you or your loved one is having trouble either following or understanding information the doctor is giving you.
- ▶ Ask if the team will designate a team member as your main contact person. They will then be the best person for you and/or your loved one to approach with your concerns and the important questions that will probably come up between appointments. Find out the best way to communicate with this person - through phone, email or an online patient portal offered by the hospital or treatment center.
- ▶ Make sure you know who to contact in an after-hours or an emergency situation when you need immediate assistance. Ask what signs or symptoms require a trip to the emergency room.
- ▶ Ask where you can find credible information online or printed resources pertaining to your loved one’s diagnosis or other needs.




Use the following worksheets to keep track of appointments and prepare for meeting with members of the healthcare team:

- **Appointment Calendar, by Month**
- **Appointment Calendar, by Week**
- **Appointment Details**
- **Questions for the Healthcare Team**

Keeping Medical Records

It's important to keep current copies of your loved one's medical information in an easy-to-find location. Take these records with you to any appointment, especially appointments with new doctors who will need to know the details of your loved one's diagnosis and treatment plan. Information that you should take with you includes :

- ▶ The patient's medical history
- ▶ The family medical history
- ▶ A list of current medications, supplements, and vitamins
- ▶ Immunization records
- ▶ Copies of recent imaging or scans
- ▶ Lab values.
- ▶ A list of all doctors or specialists the patient sees

 Use the following worksheets to track the patient's important medical information:

- **Medical History**
- **Immunization Record**

Lab Values

The healthcare team will most likely use blood tests to monitor your loved one's health. Blood test results can provide important clues about what's going on inside the body.

Be sure to talk with the healthcare team about the patient's blood cell counts, especially if the levels change. Ask for an explanation and if there is anything the patient should do to help blood cell counts return to a healthy range.

Ask members of the healthcare team for printed copies of all lab reports to keep with your loved one's medical records.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT LAB TESTS AND VALUES, VISIT:

<https://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests/understanding-your-lab-test-results.html>



TIP

Today, most facilities use electronic medical records (EMRs). EMRs include the patient history, lab results, treatment plans, imaging studies and other important information.

Providers can easily share this data with other providers. Before your loved one visits a new provider or facility, request that EMRs be shared with the new provider before the appointment

Long-Distance Caregiving

Family members often live in different cities and states. As a result, some caregivers must help their loved ones from afar. This task can be difficult, stressful and time consuming. To sustain long-distance care over a period of time, you need to be sensitive to your own needs, as well as to those of your loved one.

Is Long-Distance Caregiving for You?

In some cases, you may not have time to think carefully and plan fully before entering into a long-distance caregiving situation. The complexity of long-distance caregiving can result in a great deal of stress. Not everyone's situation or emotional makeup can sustain these extraordinary pressures over the long term.

First, ask yourself the following questions:

If you check No for any of the above questions, you may need to consider if there is someone who lives close to the patient who may be able to fulfill the role of primary caregiver. Perhaps you share the role with other family members and divide up the various responsibilities. If there isn't anyone else who can help with caregiving, is it possible for you to move and live with the patient, or for the patient to move in and stay with you? Can the patient get their medical care near you? Explore as many ways as possible to figure out the best possible caregiving situation.

You should also decide if you can handle the emotional stress of long-distance caregiving. Most caregivers experience feelings of guilt for not being as available to their loved ones as they feel they

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	YES	NO
Can I travel on short notice?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will my employer be accommodating when I need to travel? Can I take work with me?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I have family or friends near me to care for my children or pets when I am away?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I have the budget to travel?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does my loved one have family members and friends nearby to provide a support system for everyday tasks such as transportation to appointments or buying groceries?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there a budget to pay for home healthcare for my loved one?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

should be. The long-distance caregiver can also experience feelings of helplessness from not being physically able to provide care and comfort.

As you prepare to care for a loved one with cancer, think about the difficulties involved in long-distance caregiving. Your loved one may not want to move from their home, but you must consider all the alternatives and then determine which one is the best fit for everyone involved, including yourself.



Use the following worksheets to track the patient's important medical information:

- **Medical History**
- **Immunization Record**

Tips to Make Long-Distance Caregiving Manageable

The following tips can help you feel more engaged in the care of your loved one — even from many miles away:

► **Be organized:** Keep the patient's medical records, healthcare team contact information, insurance, advance directive or other legal paperwork in one place. You will need to reference this paperwork often, so it helps if it is all easily available. If you do not have access to this information, the patient will have to sign a waiver at the treatment center to allow you access.

► **Get to know members of the healthcare team.** Call or email key members of the healthcare team and introduce yourself. Then, as soon as you can, accompany your loved one to some appointments. This will give you a chance to meet each member of the healthcare team. Remember to collect all their appropriate contact information, too.

Remember, your loved one will have to give permission to the hospital or treatment center to allow you to discuss diagnosis and treatment information with members of the healthcare team.

► **Update emergency contact information with the hospital or treatment center.** Make

sure that you are listed as the emergency contact person for your loved one and that you have supplied accurate and appropriate contact information. For example, make sure the hospital has your cell phone number if you do not often answer a home number. It may be appropriate to have a local emergency contact person listed, as well. This way, in an emergency, even if it takes you time to travel, someone can be at your loved one's side.

► **Travel the right way.** When you are going to visit your loved one, make a plan to accomplish everything that needs to be done while you are there. Having a plan keeps you focused and less stressed. Talk with the patient before you go and discuss what they need. This is also a good time to set specific goals for your time together.

► **Travel expenses add up.** If you have to fly to visit your loved one, look for flights at less popular times, such as very early in the morning or late at night. These flights can be less expensive. Use multiple web sites to compare prices for hotels and flights. Take advantage of customer loyalty plans and using points or miles for free or discounted travel.

► **Build a long-distance support system.** Family, friends, neighbors, community agencies and even employers can provide valuable support as you care for your long-distance loved one.

As a long-distance caregiver, you should establish support systems for both your loved one and yourself. If family members are available but live too far away to provide hands-on support, they may be able to help with financial or legal matters that can be managed by phone or mail. If you have teenagers, ask them to get involved. This can be an opportunity to strengthen family bonds and teach your children about empathy and responsibility. Neighbors, friends and/or caring committees in your loved one's community may be willing to provide transportation or help with shopping, household chores and other tasks.

Along with the help that you and others provide from afar, your loved one may need caregiving assistance from someone closer to home. Every community has various resources and services to help you care for your distant loved one. If you are looking for information about local agencies and organizations, contact the social worker at your loved one's hospital.

► **Use a caregiver app to coordinate care.** A caregiver mobile or web-based app helps you coordinate aspects of your loved one's care by organizing friends and family who want to help. Use these apps to plan meal deliveries, set up rides to treatment, ask for volunteers for chores and give updates on your loved one. Friends and family can also post messages of support. These apps can be set to "private" so only people you allow can view the information.



Examples of caregiving coordination apps include:

Lotsa Helping Hands:

www.lotsahelpinghands.com

Caringbridge:

www.caringbridge.org

MyLifeLine:

www.mylifeline.org

► **Set up an emergency plan.** If your loved one experiences an emergency situation, you'll want to get to them as soon as possible.

If you have an emergency plan in place, you'll have more time to make clear-headed decisions about your work and home arrangements, as well as the time to think through any decisions you may have to make regarding your loved one. That means less stress, less wasted time and fewer mistakes. Try the following suggestions to help you prepare:

- Develop a support system of friends, neighbors and family members who can step in for you, and clearly define

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