
Health Professionals Who Are Part of a Cancer Care Team

It's common to have different medical specialists or health care professionals as part of your **cancer care team**. These different professionals will work together to provide care before, during, and after cancer treatment. Some of these professionals have had extra training that focuses on:

- A certain type of cancer
 - A certain type of cancer treatment
 - A specific area, system, or part of the body
 - Health problems related to cancer
 - Managing (coordinating) the cancer patient's care.
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Who is on my cancer care team?

Don't be afraid to ask the people on your team what their role is, what kind of training they've had, and what part of your care or treatment they'll be providing. Knowing how your care team works and how they communicate with each other will help you and your loved ones understand who can help with certain problems that may come up.

Medical doctors

Medical doctors are also called **physicians**. The medical doctors involved in cancer care have special training to care for certain types of cancer, perform specific procedures, prescribe certain types of treatments, or treat side effects and other problems. They might be a MD (medical doctor) or DO (doctor of osteopathic medicine) depending on which degree they have. Both MDs and DOs need to pass a licensing exam to be able to care for patients. They might have other letters after their name that describe the special training, certifications, and credentials they have.

Types of medical doctors involved in cancer care

Anesthesiologist: A doctor who specializes in giving drugs or other agents (like gasses) that can cause a total loss of feeling, put a patient into a deep sleep, or relieve pain, most often during surgery..

Cardiologist: A medical doctor who is a heart and blood vessel specialist. People with cancer might see a heart doctor if they also have heart disease or if they develop heart problems while going through cancer treatment.

Dermatologist or dermatologic oncologist: A medical doctor who has specialized training in diagnosing and treating skin cancers.

Doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO): A medical doctor with a licensing and educational background much like that of a medical doctor (MD) who is specially trained to use a “whole person” approach to medicine rather than just treating specific symptoms. See also **primary care physician**.

Endocrinologist: A medical doctor who specializes in diseases related to the glands of the endocrine system, such as the thyroid, pituitary, pancreas, pineal, and adrenal glands.

Gastroenterologist: A medical doctor who specializes in diseases of the digestive (gastrointestinal or GI) tract.

Gynecologic oncologist: A medical doctor who specializes in cancers of the female sex (reproductive) organs.

Gynecologist: A medical doctor who specializes in female health issues, including sexual and reproductive function and the diseases of their reproductive organs, except diseases of the breast that require surgery.

Hematologist or hematology oncologist: A medical doctor who specializes in blood disorders (also called blood dyscrasias), including cancers of the blood and blood-

forming tissues.

Hepatologist: A medical doctor who specializes in diseases of the liver and bile ducts.

Hospitalist: A medical doctor who works only in a hospital.

Interventional Radiologist (IR): A medical doctor who specializes in radiology and uses imaging (x-rays, scans, and other types) to help guide procedures to treat certain conditions, including some cancers. IR procedures are minimally invasive, meaning they use small incisions or don't need an incision to do the procedure. Examples are ablations and embolizations.

Medical oncologist: A medical doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer with chemotherapy and other drugs.

Naturopathic doctor (ND): A medical doctor who is not a medical doctor (MD) but is trained to use therapies that focus on supporting a person's self-healing abilities. Education and licensing of NDs varies by state.

Neonatologist: A doctor who specializes in the care of newborn babies (until about 6 weeks of age, but often longer for babies who were born prematurely).

Nephrologist: A doctor who specializes in kidney (renal) diseases.

Neurosurgeon: A doctor who specializes in operations involving the nervous system, including the brain, spinal cord, or nerves.

Oncologist: A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer.

Ophthalmologist: A doctor who specializes in eye diseases.

Oral and maxillofacial surgeon: A surgeon who specializes in surgery of the mouth, jaw, and face.

Orthopedic surgeon: A surgeon who specializes in diseases and injuries of the muscles, joint, and bones (the musculoskeletal system).

Otolaryngologist: A doctor who specializes in diseases and injuries of the ear, nose, and throat. Also called an **ENT** (which stands for ears, nose, and throat) or a **head and neck doctor**.

Pathologist: A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and classifying diseases by lab

tests and by looking at tissues and cells with a microscope. The pathologist determines whether a tumor is cancer, and, if it is cancer, the exact cell type (where it started) and grade (how fast it likely will grow).

Pediatric oncologist: A doctor who specializes in caring for children and teens with cancer (sometimes up to age 21).

Pediatrician: A doctor who specializes in caring for children and teens, including the prevention of illness, primary health care, and the treatment of diseases.

Plastic or reconstructive surgeon: A surgeon who specializes in changing the way a body part looks or in rebuilding or replacing removed or injured body parts. In reconstruction (rebuilding body parts), the surgeon may use tissue from the patient or some special material with the right consistency to hold a shape or form over time. Also called a **plastic and reconstructive surgeon**.

Primary care physician or provider: The medical doctor a person would normally see first when a medical symptom or problem comes up. A primary care doctor could be a general practitioner, a family practice doctor, a gynecologist, a pediatrician, or an internal medicine doctor (an internist).

Psychiatrist: A medical doctor specializing in the causes, treatment, and prevention of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Psychiatrists provide counseling and can also prescribe medicines or other treatments.

Pulmonologist: A medical doctor who has specialized experience and knowledge in the diagnosing and treating lung (pulmonary) conditions and diseases.

Radiation oncologist: A medical doctor who specializes in using radiation to treat cancer.

Radiologist: A medical doctor with special training in diagnosing diseases by interpreting (reading) x-rays and other types of imaging studies that make pictures of the inside of the body.

Surgeon: A medical doctor with special training who performs surgery to cut or remove tumors or parts of the body affected by a disease.

Surgical oncologist: A surgeon who specializes in performing surgery to treat cancer.

Urologist: A medical doctor who specializes in treating problems of the urinary tract (in both sexes) and the male reproductive tract.

Nurses

Nurses can be generalists who care for many different types of patients. How much care they can provide and what type of procedures they can do depends on their license and training.

Types of nurses involved in cancer care

Licensed practical nurse (LPN) or licensed vocational nurse (LVN): A nurse who has completed technical health training, and passed a basic licensing test. The LPN can take vital signs, give some medicines, observe and help patients with personal hygiene and care, and perform other health care-related tasks.

Registered nurse (RN): A professional nurse who has completed a college degree nursing program and passed a national examination. The RN can assess, educate, and treat patients, families, or even communities. They may work in and can get certified in almost any health specialty. RNs often supervise LPNs.

Advanced practice registered nurse (APRN): A professional RN who went back to school to get a master's or doctoral degree. APRNs can be a clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, or nurse anesthetist.

- **Clinical nurse specialist (CNS):** An APRN with a master's or doctoral degree and special certification who works closely with the entire care team. A CNS has advanced training and clinical experience in a certain area of medical and nursing practice. Oncology CNSs have many different roles, such as direct patient or family care, supervising and teaching staff, nursing research related to cancer patients, quality monitoring, or teaching about cancer, treatment, and side effects.
- **Nurse practitioner (NP):** An APRN with a master's or doctoral degree and special certification who works closely with a doctor, helps to diagnose and manage care, and has advanced training and clinical experience in a certain area of medical and nursing practice.
- **Nurse anesthetist (CRNA):** A nurse with an advanced degree and training in giving drugs or other agents (like gasses) that cause a total loss of feeling or relieve pain, most often during surgery.

Nurses can be specially trained and certified to care for specific groups of patients, focus on caring for specific health problems, or give specific types of treatments. Here are some examples:

- **Clinical trials nurse:** A RN who has been trained to teach, monitor, and treat patients who are enrolled in a research study (clinical trial).
- **Enterostomal therapy nurse:** A RN who has been trained and certified to teach people how to care for ostomies (surgically created openings such as a colostomy or urostomy) and wounds. Also called an **ostomy nurse** or a **wound care nurse**.
- **Home health nurse:** A LPN or RN who provides care in the patient's home, including teaching about and giving medicines and certain treatments, and checking to see if the patient needs other medical care.
- **Hospice nurse:** A LPN or RN who is part of a hospice care team and an expert in assessing and managing a patient who is nearing the end of life.
- **Nurse navigator:** A LPN or RN who guides patients and their families through complex medical systems, helps manage symptoms and side effects, and works with the rest of the cancer care team to overcome barriers that may come up. There can also be non-clinical patient navigators who are lay people with special training or other health professionals, like social workers.
- **Radiation therapy nurse:** A RN who is an expert in the radiation therapy care of patients. This nurse may teach the patient about treatment before it starts and help manage any treatment side effects.
- **Infusion therapy nurse:** A RN who is an expert trained in giving chemotherapy, targeted therapy, and immunotherapy. Often called "chemo nurses," these RNs teach patients and caregivers about treatment, give and monitor treatment infusions or injections, and help assess and manage any treatment side effects.

Other health care professionals

Depending on your needs, you might have other health professionals, in addition to medical doctors and nurses, as part of your care team. Some of these professionals might work directly with your cancer care team in the same cancer center or hospital. Or you might be referred to someone who works in a different facility but who focuses on a specific part of your care.

Types of other health professionals involved in cancer care

Case manager: Often a nurse or social worker who coordinates the patient's care throughout diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, often working with the insurance company, and connecting the patient and family to resources.

Chaplain: A member of the clergy who helps manage the spiritual needs of the patient and family and can usually address many denominations, faiths, and beliefs.

Dietitian or registered dietitian (RD): An expert in the area of nutrition, food, and diet who has passed a national board exam. Many RDs specialize in areas like weight management, exercise science, cancer care, or cardiac rehabilitation. See also **nutritionist**.

Discharge coordinator or planner: Often a nurse or social worker who helps make sure patients leaving the hospital have what they need to continue their recovery at home. They also may help a patient find other places to go after leaving the hospital, such as a nursing home or rehab, where they can continue to get the care they need.

Dosimetrist: A person with special training and certification who calculates and plans the correct dose of radiation therapy (the amount, rate, and how the dose is spread out) for cancer treatment and/or other diseases.

Genetic counselor: A specially trained health professional who helps people understand the risk of a genetic disorder and if genetic testing may be helpful based on personal and family history. The counselor also meets with people who have had genetic testing to provide information about screening options and preventive measures based on the results.

Hospice care specialists or team: Doctors, nurses, other health care professionals, social workers, chaplains, counselors, and trained volunteers who work together in a patient and family-centered approach. The work of a hospice team focuses on the physical, emotional, or spiritual needs of patient who is nearing the end of life and is no longer in active treatment for a serious illness.

Nutritionist: A title sometimes used interchangeably with dietitian, but educational requirements for nutritionists vary by state. See also **dietitian**.

Occupational therapist (OT): A licensed and specially trained therapist who works with people who have functional impairments or limitations to help them develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working. They also work to prevent disability and maintain health. The practice of occupational therapy includes evaluation, treatment, and consultation.

Pain specialists: Doctors, nurses, and/or pharmacists who are experts in pain control. In many places there's a team of health professionals who are available to address pain issues.

Palliative care specialists or team: Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care professionals who work together to manage symptoms, such as pain, nausea, or fatigue. A palliative care team approach can be used for any patient (of any age) who

has a serious illness. Palliative care teams can and often work alongside cancer care teams to help manage side effects during and after cancer treatment. These teams are often used to help patients during any stage of cancer, from diagnosis, throughout treatment, and to the end of life.

Patient navigator: A person who guides patients and their families through complex medical systems and helps them work with the rest of the cancer care team to overcome barriers to care that may come up so they can successfully complete their treatment. Navigators can be lay people with special training and experience or health care professionals, like nurses or social workers.

Pharmacist (RPh or PharmD): A licensed health professional who has at least a bachelor's degree in pharmacy. Some pharmacists have a doctoral degree. Pharmacists help to make sure the treatments and medicines prescribed to patients are safe and effective. They also help manage symptoms and side effects that might need medicines to help relieve them.

Physical therapist (PT or DPT): A licensed health professional, who has at least a bachelor's degree in physical therapy, who helps examine, test, and treat physical problems, and uses exercises, heat, cold, and other methods to restore or maintain the body's strength, mobility, and function.

Physician assistant (PA): A certified and licensed medical professional with a master's or doctoral level degree. Physician assistants practice medicine on teams with doctors and other health care professionals, providing a wide range of services. They may specialize in certain diseases or fields of medicine depending on their training and experience.

Psychologist: A health professional who has a graduate degree in psychology and training in clinical psychology. This specialist assesses a person's mental and emotional status and provides testing and counseling services to those who may have an emotional or mental health problem.

Radiation therapist: A person with special training to use the equipment that delivers radiation therapy. This expert often helps the patient get into the right position for treatment and then actually gives the treatment.

Radiologic technologist: A health professional who positions patients for x-rays and other imaging tests, takes the images, and then develops and checks the images for quality. The films taken by the technologist are then sent to a radiologist to be read.

Respiratory therapist: A professional who works with people who have breathing

problems. This can include breathing treatments and managing patients on ventilators (breathing machines). A CRTT or **certified respiratory therapy technician** may also examine the patient, collect information about lung function, and set up and maintain equipment, such as ventilators.

Sex therapist: A mental health professional such as a licensed psychiatrist, social worker, clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, or psychologist with special training in counseling people about sexual changes, problems, and communication (for example, after treatment for cancer). It's common for a sex therapist to work with both sexual partners, rather than just one person.

Social worker: A health professional with special training in dealing with social, emotional, and environmental problems that may come with illness or disability. A social worker may help people find community resources and support services, and provide counseling and guidance to help with issues such as insurance coverage, nursing home placement, and emotional distress. An **oncology social worker** is an expert in coordinating and providing help for the cancer patient and family, such as counseling them and helping to manage financial problems, housing or child care issues (such as when treatments are given at a facility away from home), and coping with different types of emotional distress.

Speech therapist: A health professional who is specially trained to work with people who have speech and swallowing problems. Speech therapists help people learn skills to communicate and also make sure that patients can safely eat and drink. Also called a **speech pathologist**.

Hyperlinks

1. www.abms.org/
2. www.ama-assn.org/

Additional resources

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources that can give you information and help you find the best cancer treatment for you include:

American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) Toll-free number: 1-866-ASK-ABMS (1-866-275-2267) Website: www.abms.org¹

- Keeps a list of all board-certified physicians and can be contacted to find out if a certain doctor is certified by an approved ABMS Board. Searches for certain types

of doctors in your region can be done only on the website.

American Medical Association (AMA) Toll-free number: 1-800-262-3211

Website: www.ama-assn.org²

- Website offers information on specific doctors by name, or search for doctors by specialty and geographic location. (Choose “Doctor Finder” on the AMA home page.)

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

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