

Five Questions to Ask Your Doctor When You (or a Loved One) are Diagnosed with a Serious Illness

When you're diagnosed with a serious illness, it is common to have a mixture of many emotions – fear, anger, sadness, anxiety, guilt. Also, if you have had symptoms for a long time or have undergone many tests, finally “knowing the answer” may in some ways be a relief.

It can be very hard to think clearly in such a situation, so try not to be preoccupied with asking all of the “right” questions immediately. Below are some questions that can help you discuss your diagnosis with your doctor.

1. Can you tell me that again?

It is completely normal to not be able to take in everything that you are told. Whether it is at the same appointment or at the next one, it can be helpful to ask this question to make sure you understand what your doctor is telling you.

2. Can I say that back to you so I know that I correctly understand what you are telling me?

Studies show that in many cases physicians believe they are clearly and fully explaining a diagnosis, while in reality the patient has left the discussion with only a partial or incorrect understanding of the information. Ask your doctor if you can tell him/her your understanding of the conversation in your own words to make sure you fully understand everything.

3. What do we do next?

Knowing what comes next can often relieve your anxiety. Work with your doctor to get a sense of the plan. When are you seeing the doctor next? Are there more tests that need to be done before the next visit?





Five Questions (cont.)

4. How serious is this?

Many times there are very good treatments that can cure your disease, and your doctor can tell you about them. Remember that not everyone wants to know the answer to this question – so doctors may not always tell you this without you asking. Also remember that if you are a family member who hears the diagnosis with a loved one, he or she may not want to know the answer (and vice-versa). So sometimes it is important to first ask your loved one, “How much do you want to know now?”

5. What else should I be asking at this point?

This kind of open-ended question allows your doctor to give you information that you might not think to ask. Many times it is difficult to think on the spot, so you may need help with asking more questions.

Remember this is a stressful time, and it is normal to forget things. Write down what your doctor says. Then, when you get home, write down questions you and your family have about the diagnosis. If you are the patient and you went to the appointment alone, it is a good idea to take a loved one with you next time – both for emotional support as well as to help you understand and remember what the doctor says.

And don't forget that you can always ask for palliative care if you begin to suffer from symptoms and stress or need more in-depth communication. Learn more at getpalliativecare.org/howtoget.

Source: GetPalliativeCare.org | GetPalliativeCare.org does not provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Copyright © 2019, Center to Advance Palliative Care. All rights reserved.

Transitions LifeCare provides physical, emotional, and spiritual care to those who are navigating end-of-life or life-changing illness in Wake County and the surrounding areas.

Call us anytime at 919.828.0890.