



## 10 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU RECEIVE A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

First, let me say how sorry I am that you are dealing with a cancer diagnosis. In my book I try to be honest about the tough moments and funny about the awkward moments of cancer treatment. But I suspect what you need right now is straight talk - not humor - so I am hopeful that the below list will be a good starting point for you as you begin to learn about how you will fight this disease.

### **1. Understand your diagnosis.**

The first step you and your doctors must take is to understand what kind of cancer you have and what stage it is in. You might not receive a full diagnosis until after a biopsy or in some cases - after a surgery to remove the tumor. It is excruciating to wait for this - but only once you have a full diagnosis will your doctors understand what treatment plan will best fight your specific cancer.

### **2. Get a second opinion.**

It may be helpful to have more than one doctor look at your scans and tests to make a diagnosis and/or to get other opinions on how best to treat your specific disease. In some cases, getting a second opinion may delay your treatment but it also may bring greater clarity to your diagnosis and/or different (better) ideas about your treatment. I would also recommend you determine if you like and trust your doctor(s) - as you will be spending A LOT of time with them. By visiting a couple of doctors, you give yourself options.

### **3. Understand your treatment options.**

“There has never been a better time to have cancer” my oncologist told me - because there are more treatments available than ever before. And every body is different - so different treatments work for different bodies. Doctors may ask if you want to pursue certain treatment options - so it is good to have some idea of what the treatment will entail. I decided to be very aggressive in my treatment, but not everyone makes that decision.

### **4. Identify your support network.**

Cancer can be hard - mentally, emotionally, physically. It is super helpful to have another set of ears join your doctor appointments - to drive you there and back (radiation and chemo can make you sleepy) - but also to help you ask questions and record the doctor's answers. I was amazed at the things I missed that the doctor said because I had so much adrenaline pumping through me during my first couple of oncology visits. Having someone in the room to take notes can be so helpful. You can concentrate on asking questions and your support person (aka the notetaker) records the answers. If you do not live near your support system - many medical centers have “patient advocates” who can attend doctor visits with you and serve as that second set of ears.

### **5. Cautiously and conservatively Google.**

You will be looking for two things, I suspect. First - side effects from treatments. Remember again that every body is different and just because a side effect is listed does not mean that your body will react that way. Second, you will likely google survival statistics. It is helpful to remember that there are two sides to any statistic and you can commit to being on the “good” side - the side that survives.

### **6. Consider anti-anxiety medication.**

I was so freaked out mentally/emotionally by my diagnoses that I was convinced I would die of a heart attack before I could die from the cancers. I found the “witching hour” of 3-5pm especially difficult for some reason. I requested anti-anxiety medication from my doctor and was given Ativan or what I referred to as my “get-the-f\*\*k-over-it-you-have-cancer” pill. It helped take the edge off. I suspect CBD products could be equally (?) helpful.

### **7. Consider guided imagery/meditation/other relaxation techniques.**

As out-there as it might sound, I found guided imagery (listening to someone talk me through visualizations) really helped me mourn - and later, accept - my cancer diagnoses. Once I accepted that I had cancer, I relaxed and leaned into the treatments. I think it really helped my body accept the medicine and fight the cancer. And you know what? I was less freaked out.

### **8. Understand your insurance coverage.**

Insurance is confusing in the best of circumstances and when it comes to a cancer diagnosis (and paying for your treatments) it can become overwhelming. I would suggest you proactively call your insurance company to understand what costs you will be expected to cover (deductibles, coinsurance obligations, maximum out-of-pocket, etc.) and what costs they will cover. I kept a spreadsheet of all costs coming in and I took notes on every conversation I had with the insurance company and billing departments. I had to birddog all of it because doctors' billing departments were telling me my bills were overdue and I often had to remind the insurance company to pay and/or argue with them about what they would cover. You may want to explore whether your health insurance company (or the medical center where you are being treated) offers patient advocates who can help with this. A patient advocate is someone who can be a critical partner in helping you sort out your insurance and billing.

### **9. If possible, get every doctor's email address so that you can coordinate your care.**

I was surprised by how doctors at some medical centers don't regularly speak or email with one another to coordinate patient care. I learned that an easy way to encourage that coordination is to cc all of my other doctors when I emailed one of them so they understood what was being discussed and how each doctor was answering my questions. Some medical centers give you the ability to do this in a centralized system. OR self-appoint someone in your doctor's office to be your coordinator. OR (again) ask if a patient advocate is available to help with coordinating your care. But if you can do it via shamelessly cc'ing all of your doctors - I would strongly encourage it.

### **10. Breathe.**

Yes, I know this all feels hard right now but you will do it. You will be as strong as you need to be. You will do it because you have to do it. Just keep breathing in and out.