Palliative Care: What You Need to Know

Palliative care is an approach to care that focuses on providing relief from the pain, discomfort and stress that comes from a serious illness such as cancer. Palliative care can be administered at any point during the cancer experience and is most beneficial when incorporated from the initial diagnosis. This fact sheet will highlight:

- What palliative care is
- Benefits of palliative care
- Common myths about palliative care
- How to talk about palliative care with your medical team and loved ones

What Is Palliative Care?

Palliative care focuses on relieving the physical and emotional suffering and difficulties one might experience throughout a cancer diagnosis. This care can improve the quality of life for the patient and help them manage the symptoms of cancer, the side effects of treatment and the psychological impact of the disease. Palliative care reflects an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to address the many and varied needs of patients and their caregivers. This approach enables more individualized, patient-centered, helps facilitate communication with the care team and builds a network of support for the patient, family, and other caregivers.

The Benefits of Palliative Care

Patients receive significant benefits from palliative care:

- Higher quality of life
- Enhancement of human dignity
- Lower rates of depression
- Greater satisfaction with care
- Better symptom management
- Longer survival
- Strengthened coping ability
- Lower health care costs

Caregivers also benefit from palliative care:

- Lower levels of depression
- Reduced stress
- Less psychological distress
- Decreased caregiver burden
- Improved social and spiritual well-being
- Strengthened coping ability

Myths About Palliative Care

Many people have false ideas about palliative care, which can prevent them from getting the help they need.

“Palliative care is for people who are dying.”

Being offered palliative care does not mean that you or your loved one is dying. It is simply a form of help with pain, discomfort and stress, not the end of hope.

“Palliative care is only available if I stop treatment.”

Palliative care does not mean the end to cancer treatments. It is not a last resort or an indication that treatment has failed. It can be done alongside treatment.

“Palliative care means hospice care.”

Palliative care is administered through the diagnosis, regardless of prognosis. Hospice care is provided only after someone stops cancer treatment or nearing end-of-life.

“Palliative care is only to treat pain and prescribe opioids.”

There are many ways to improve a person’s quality of life and reduce their discomfort beyond pain medications. Palliative care utilizes all the tools and services available to ensure patients receive the highest level of care. These can be discussed with your health care team.

Talking About Palliative Care

People are much more likely to use palliative care when they understand the benefits.

Whether you are talking to the medical team, the patient or the caregiver, discuss palliative care in initial conversations about the diagnosis and treatment approach.

Use language to increase comfort with the subject, such as supportive or comfort care, and to instill hope, regardless of prognosis.

Make clear that palliative care and hospice care are not the same thing.

Connect palliative care treatment to the specific needs, such as relieving side effects, reducing stress or maintaining activities they enjoy.

Discuss what may cause resistance to palliative care. What are their worries? What are their misconceptions? You may discuss this with your health care team or an oncology social worker who can help you.

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