



Side effects are changes and problems that
(1) occur during treatment and
(2) are due to the treatment —not the disease.

Why it's vital to talk about side effects:

- Talking about side effects is essential to getting good care and living as fully as possible.
- Tests and scans don't tell your physicians how you feel — you have to tell them.
- Untreated side effects drain physical and emotional resources that can be used for healing.
- Since you — and your body's response to therapy — are unique, your doctors depend on you to tell them about your side effects.

Pocket Guide to Talking about Side Effects of Cancer Treatments

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MD Anderson

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Interpersonal Communication and
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How to report side effects:

- Describe your side effects.
- Explain how they impact your life.

For example, are they keeping you from fulfilling responsibilities? Enjoying hobbies? Sleeping? Visiting with friends and family?

How your doctors use your reports of side effects:

- They use this information to prevent complications.
- They may be able to make adjustments that decrease your side effects *without decreasing your chance for recovery*

At doctor visits, ask yourself: *Do my doctors know what side effects I am experiencing — and how they impact my life?*

Common obstacles to talking about side effects

Many patients...

- Forget to bring it up.
- Don't want to complain.
- Believe they're supposed to have side effects.
- Want to avoid more tests, scans and doctor visits.
- Assume their physicians already know how they feel — or can't do anything to help.
- Worry about disappointing or annoying their physicians.
- Fear they will hurt their chance of long-term survival by
 - distracting their physicians from treating the cancer.
 - causing their physicians to decrease cancer therapy dosages.

Overcoming obstacles to reporting side effects

If you feel uncomfortable reporting side effects, try explaining how you feel when mentioning them. For example,

- “I’m embarrassed to tell you this, but…”
- “I’m afraid you’ll find something bad if I tell you this, but…”
- “I can’t afford more medical bills right now, but…”
- “I don’t want to look like a complainer, but…”
- “I feel like this is too minor to report, but…”
- “I’m worried you’ll change my treatment if I tell you this, but…”

If it’s still difficult to report your side effects, try bringing a written list or a friend/family member to mention them.

Tips for talking about side effects

- Doctor visits are NOT social visits.
- Talking about side effects is NOT complaining, but reporting vital information.
- Doctors can’t read minds — they need you to tell them.
- The desire to get well needs to outweigh the desire to avoid bothering your physicians, hearing bad news or undergoing more tests.

You have a right to feel as well as possible during treatment, and you can help make that happen.

Resources

Happiness in a Storm: Facing Illness and Embracing Life as a Healthy Survivor
(WW Norton and Company, Inc.; 2006)

A book to help patients get good care and live as fully as possible.

For more information about talking with your doctors, visit:
www.mdanderson.org/icare

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