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## Health Professionals Associated with Cancer Care

It's common to have different specialists or health care professionals as part of your cancer care team. In fact, having different professionals work together is an approach that is used in many hospitals and clinics before, during, and after cancer treatment. Some of these professionals have had extra training that focused on:

- A certain type of cancer
- A 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.

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.

Here is a list of some of the health care professionals you may meet with a short explanation of their role in your 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..

**Case manager:** The member of the cancer care team 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.

**Clinical nurse specialist (CNS):** An advanced practice registered nurse (APN or APRN) with a master's or doctoral degree and special certification who works closely with the entire care team, and 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 staff, nursing research related to cancer patients, or teaching about cancer, treatment, and side effects.

**Dermatological oncologist:** A dermatologist who has specialized training in diagnosing and treating skin cancers.

**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.

**Doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO):** A 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**.

**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.

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

**Enterostomal therapist:** A nurse 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**.

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

**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.

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

**Gynecologist:** A 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:** A doctor who specializes in blood disorders (also called blood dyscrasias), including cancers of the blood and blood-forming tissues.

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

**Home health nurse:** A nurse 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 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.

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

**Licensed practical nurse (LPN) or licensed vocational nurse (LVN):** A nurse who has completed a year or so of technical health training, and passed a licensing test. This nurse can give some medicines, help patients with personal hygiene and care, and perform other health care-related tasks.

**Medical oncologist:** A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer with chemotherapy and other drugs. A medical oncologist is different from a surgical oncologist, who mostly treats cancer with surgery.

**Naturopathic doctor (ND):** A 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.

**Nurse anesthetist:** 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.

**Nurse practitioner (NP):** An advanced practice registered nurse (APN or 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.

**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.

**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**.

**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.

**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).

**Patient or nurse 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.

**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.

**Pharmacist (RPh or PharmD):** A licensed health professional who has at least a bachelor's degree in pharmacy. Pharmacists help to make sure treatments and medicines prescribed to patients are safe and effective. See also Pain specialists and Palliative care specialists.

**Physical therapist (PT):** 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.

**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 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.

**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.

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

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

**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.

**Radiation therapy nurse:** A registered nurse 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.

**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.

**Radiologist:** A 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.

**Registered nurse (RN):** A professional nurse who has completed a college program

and passed a national examination. RNs may assess, educate, and treat patients, families, or even communities. They may work in and can get certified in almost any health specialty. They can also go back to school to become an advanced practice nurse (APN or APRN) such as a clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, or nurse anesthetist.

**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**.

**Surgeon:** A doctor with special training who performs surgery to cut or remove tumors or parts of the body affected by a disease. A **surgical oncologist** is a surgeon who specializes in performing surgery to treat cancer. A **thoracic surgeon** is a doctor who operates on organs in the thorax or chest, including the lungs, ribs, the sternum (breast bone), the diaphragm (the muscle that helps breathing).

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

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.abms.org/](http://www.abms.org/)
2. [www.ama-assn.org/](http://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.org](http://www.abms.org)<sup>1</sup>

- 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.org](http://www.ama-assn.org)<sup>2</sup>

- 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.*

Last Revised: August 7, 2019

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