



PALLIATIVE CARE: IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

GETTING HELP FOR SYMPTOMS AND SIDE EFFECTS

The term *palliative care* is not always well understood. Palliative care is focused on improving quality of life by providing an extra layer of support from a team of doctors, nurses and other professionals. The team will work together to manage symptoms such as pain, shortness of breath, fatigue or depression. Palliative care is appropriate for patients with any stage of cancer as well as other serious and chronic illnesses, including multiple sclerosis, AIDS, heart disease, dementia and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

“Palliative care is specialized medical care for people with serious illnesses. This type of care is focused on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, and stress of a serious illness—whatever the diagnosis. The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family. Palliative care is provided by a team of doctors, nurses and other specialists who work with a patient’s other doctors to provide an extra layer of support. Palliative care is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness, and can be provided together with curative treatment.”

- Diane Meier, M.D., Director, Center to Advance Palliative Care, 2011

Quality of life can often be improved by involving a palliative care specialist, a doctor who specializes in treatment of the pain and symptoms of a serious illness. Receiving palliative care is sometimes thought of as a sign that there is nothing more that can be done to treat your illness, but that is not the case. You can—and should—receive palliative care at the same time as you receive treatment intended to cure your cancer or extend your life. In fact, recent studies have shown that patients with cancer who receive palliative care live longer than similar patients who do not receive palliative care services.

WHAT DOES PALLIATIVE CARE INVOLVE?

Palliative care and hospice care are often used interchangeably, but they are different in important ways. Palliative care should be provided any time a patient is experiencing uncomfortable or painful

symptoms. In contrast, hospice is intended to provide a wide range of support services for individuals who have limited life expectancy and their loved ones. Individuals are typically defined as being eligible for hospice if they have no more than six to 12 months to live. While people in hospice always receive palliative care, you don’t have to be in hospice or at the end of your life to receive palliative care, which provides relief from symptoms.

Cancer and other serious illnesses and their treatments can cause symptoms and side effects that affect quality of life. If you’re experiencing pain or other symptoms and your doctor has been unable to control them, ask about being referred to a palliative care specialist. The palliative care doctor can work with your other doctors to address your concerns and those of your family. You should expect to receive care that provides relief from pain and other symptoms and helps you, as much as possible, maintain a good quality of life during treatment and at end of life.

Studies have shown that many people suffer pain and other troubling symptoms and distress unnecessarily during the final months of their lives. These symptoms can almost always be prevented, relieved or controlled. Discussion of your options for care should include clear explanations of the choices available, including the pros and cons of each choice, so that you can make a decision that is right for you.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization:
<http://www.nhpco.org>

National Institute of Nursing Research, National Institutes of Health: Palliative Care: The Relief You Need When You’re Experiencing the Symptoms of Serious Illness http://cancer.ucsf.edu/_docs/sms/PalliativeCare.pdf