

Tip Sheet:

Support Groups for Cancer

Facing cancer is a stressful life experience. You may feel a mix of emotions including shock, fear, anger, confusion, sadness, and a sense of loss. While family and friends often provide important emotional support, you may find it helpful to talk with others who understand what it's like to have cancer.

Support groups provide a safe place for people who are living with cancer to share feelings, encouragement, and ideas for coping with the disease.

Benefits

Attending a support group has benefits and may allow you to:

- Feel less alone and isolated
- Connect with others who have faced similar situations and challenges
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Feel more hopeful
- Get practical information about treatment, side effects, etc.
- Find new ways to solve problems, such as how to manage at work
- Share insights with others
- Make meaning of the cancer experience by talking about the ways cancer has affected your life

Other information about Support Groups

Support groups meet in person, by telephone, or on the Internet (through chat rooms, forums, email lists, etc.). Telephone and online support groups may be good options if you live in a remote area, prefer not to meet face-to-face, or have a rare cancer for which there is no local support group.

Groups may include:

- All types of cancer
- Specific cancers (e.g., lung, prostate, lymphoma)
- Different stages of cancer (e.g., newly diagnosed, advanced)
- Certain age groups (e.g., young women with breast cancer)
- Caregivers and family members
- Patients and caregivers together

Some support groups are led by members themselves. Others are guided by a professional, such as a social worker or psychologist. Online groups are usually not monitored by professionals. Some groups are open-ended, where participants drop in and membership changes over time. Others are closed, where people are asked to attend regularly over a period of time.

Support groups can focus on emotional support (talking about what's on people's minds), on learning skills (eg. meditation, how to improve communication with others), or on cancer-related education (through speakers, videos, etc.). Some groups offer a combination of sharing and learning. Topics discussed might include:

- Strategies for coping
- Impact on family and loved ones
- Sexuality, intimacy, dating
- Navigating the health-care system
- Communicating with your care team
- Dealing with uncertainty and the ups and downs of cancer
- Financial worries
- Returning to work
- How to not let cancer control your life
- How to advocate (speak up) for yourself

Personal choice

Joining a support group is a personal choice. For some people, connecting with others in a group setting provides comfort. Others may feel uncomfortable or worry that hearing other people's problems will make them feel worse. Some people prefer to meet one-on-one with a therapist, talk with a religious counselor, ask specific questions of a doctor or nurse, or spend time with friends, family, and enjoyable activities. You might combine several of these approaches.

Don't give up

If you attend a support group and it doesn't seem like a good fit, don't give up! Try attending at least two or three meetings and consider speaking to the group leader. Every support group is different because of the particular mix of people and personalities, and it may take a little time to find the right one for you.

What groups does Dana-Farber offer?

Dana-Farber offers a range of support groups that are focused on specific cancers, types of treatment, and stages of care. Most are in-person, meet once a month, and average about 8-12 people per session. To see a full list of groups, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call 617-632-4235.

Our support group meetings are guided by experienced and compassionate staff.

You can learn about Dana-Farber’s support groups through:

- Your medical care team
- A Dana-Farber social worker
- Fliers, screens, and other materials on patient floors
- The “Support Groups and Seminars” section of the Dana-Farber website, at www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups
- The “Spiritual Care” section of the Dana-Farber website, at www.dana-farber.org/spirituality
- The Young Adult Program (YAP), which runs a monthly support group for patients in their 20s and 30s and also supports caregivers. Visit www.dana-farber.org/youngadults

You can also join online conversations about living with cancer by signing up for Dana-Farber CancerConnect. We have partnered with CancerConnect, a platform of online communities, to bring you into a circle of other cancer patients, survivors, family members, and friends. You can safely express your thoughts, pose questions, voice concerns, or just read what others have to say. Visit www.dana-farber.org/for-patients-and-families/my-dana-farber/dana-farber-cancerconnect to learn more.

Looking for a support group in your local community? Please call 617-632-4235.

National Websites

Free services for finding support groups:

- American Cancer Society: Helps locate support programs and services in your area, as well as online communities. Call 1-800-227-2345 toll-free or visit www.cancer.org; search for “Support Programs”
- CancerCare: Offers online, telephone, and face-to-face support groups for patients and loved ones, led by oncology social workers. It can also help locate support groups in your community. Call 1-800-813-HOPE (4673) toll-free or visit www.cancercare.org; search “Support Groups”

General information about cancer support groups:

- American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), visit www.cancer.net; search “Support Groups”
- National Cancer Institute, 1-800-422-6237 toll-free or visit www.cancer.gov; search “Cancer Support Groups”

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.