Patient Handout: Palliative Care

By Wendy S. Harpham, MD, FACP

Dear Patient,

While taking care of your cancer, we also want to decrease your stress and enable you to live as fully as possible. Sometimes we ask the palliative care team to help us achieve those goals. This handout summarizes facts we need you to know about palliative care.

What is palliative care?
Palliative (pronounced ‘pal-lee-uh-tiv’) care is a specialty focused on helping you live your best possible life by …
- Optimizing your comfort
- Strengthening your resilience and coping skills
- Providing support for you and your family
- Helping you make the best decisions for you, especially about treatment

Who does palliative care?
Palliative care is delivered by one or more members of a team of health care professionals. Different hospitals and clinics have different palliative care services. Some have just a few professionals; others have a large team that may include …
- Physicians (including palliative care specialists) and nurses
- Social workers
- Counselors and psychologists
- Pastoral care workers
- Pharmacists and dieticians
- Therapists (such as physical therapists; music therapists; occupational therapists; orthotists and prosthetists; physiotherapists; podiatrists)

Whatever the challenges, big or small, palliative care helps you make life the best it can be by addressing discomforts (such as pain, shortness of breath, and anxiety); decreasing stress; improving sleep; maintaining independence; managing bills; dealing with questions of “Why?” and helping you talk with family members who have different opinions about your care. Palliative care also helps you by helping your family cope with the changes and challenges.

Is palliative care the same as hospice?
No. This is a common source of confusion. Palliative care is an all-inclusive term for care devoted to improving comfort. Palliative care is for people of any age with any medical condition, including patients we expect to cure.

In contrast, hospice is a specialized type of palliative care for people whose life expectancy is 6 months (or less), whether due to chronic disease, sudden illness or injury, or normal aging.

Do palliative care specialists encourage patients to give up hope?
No, they do the opposite. They ask what you are hoping for. They understand and support your decisions. Palliative care offers services to help them deal with their own needs and hopes in ways that help them and don’t harm you. Educational materials, counseling, and support can make a world of difference, whether by helping with meals, transportation, respite care, or troubling thoughts and feelings that are common, normal, and burdensome. Regarding your treatment path, palliative care specialists advocate for you by guiding your loved ones to understand and support your decisions.

What if you’re not sick enough to get palliative care involved?
We don’t want to leave any stone unturned in optimizing your quality of life while treating your cancer. Palliative care can help us avoid preventable problems and address all treatable sources of distress, even small problems and mild discomforts you can handle in the short run. The better you feel, physically and emotionally, the better you can handle treatments and enjoy life between office visits. Bottom line: It’s never too early to ask the palliative care team to assess if they might be able to help improve your quality of life and/or talk about difficult topics.

Where do you receive palliative care?
Depending on your condition and specific needs, you may receive palliative care in an outpatient clinic, in-hospital room, extended-care facility, nursing home, or your private home. Some palliative care services use phone calls and/or telemedicine (computer video calls).

What now?
Let’s talk about asking palliative care to help you live your best life today, tomorrow, and every day.