

Understanding Your Treatment Plan

Stage-four lung cancer hasn't stopped Walter Hawkins.

Far from it. Three times a week, he and his wife, Paulina, step out for a brisk six-mile walk. That's remarkable, because when he was diagnosed, Walter learned that the cancer had spread to his spine and that he likely would never walk again. He was told he had 3 to 6 months to live.

"Now it's over three years that I've been with cancer."-Walter, Patient

"Any questions about it?"-Nurse

"No."-Walter, Patient

After receiving chemotherapy and radiation, Walter has been getting immunotherapy, which helps his own body fight the cancer.

"The things I work towards, is coming here twice a month, every other week to have that infusion, because that's my bloodline, that's my life."-Walter, Patient

The therapy is part of Walter's treatment plan... a key part of cancer care. Treatment plans are based on: the type of cancer, its location and stage and your overall health.

"All of those go into trying to create the treatment plan for a given patient, which will probably last the next two to four to six months, at which point you may reevaluate and then come up with either a different plan or a way to maintain that plan."-Dr. Sagar Lonial, MD, Oncologist

The plan may include: the goal of treatment—whether cure, extending life or relieving symptoms, the specific treatment or treatments you'll receive, where you'll receive them, how often and how long you'll receive them, possible side effects and follow-up care after treatment.

"I'm so happy to report that everything looks completely stable."

Understanding your plan is crucial. If you have any questions, be sure to ask them, as Walter and Paulina have done.

"We both need to find answers. She had to be in every doctor's visit, and she needed to ask any questions that she had about any what-if's."-Walter, Patient

Possible questions to ask about your plan include: How likely is it that the treatment will help? How will we know if it's working? Should someone come with me to treatment sessions? When will I start having side effects and long

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will they last? What can I do to lessen them? Will I be able to work and do my regular activities?

How long after treatment will I be able to get back to my normal routine? Will my insurance cover the costs? Are there clinical trials I may want to consider?

Your input to the plan is important, so if there's anything you want to change or don't feel comfortable with... speak up. And if you'd like a second opinion from another expert, don't hesitate to get one.

"In general, I think getting a second opinion is always a good idea. And many patients are worried that they're gonna offend their original doctor if they do that. Most of us accept this as a normal part of what happens."-Dr. Sagar Lonial, MD, Oncologist

Walter's plan has enabled him to get out of bed and leave his wheelchair behind – one step at a time. Recently, he reached a major milestone, the finish line in Atlanta's 10K Peachtree Road Race.

"It was an accomplishment that I was a winner, and I was beating cancer."-Walter, Patient

Can you imagine from the bed paralyzed to 6.2 miles every other day? Sometimes I have to catch up with him, looking at him, and say, "This is a miracle."-Paulina

"I feel good. My future looks very bright."-Walter, Patient