



Understanding Cancer Survival Statistics



Overview

As part of your cancer care, your doctor may show you survival statistics. This information can help you understand how your disease is likely to progress. The statistics come from the medical histories of large groups of similar cancer patients.

Only an Average

Survival statistics show how long others have survived with your cancer. But these numbers are only averages. You may have a similar outcome, or you may not. These numbers can't predict exactly what will happen to you, because your case is unique.

Time Periods

Your doctor may show you the percentage of patients who lived one year, two years or five years after their original diagnosis. These are just standard time periods used for calculation. They are not meant as special limits or goals. For example, if your doctor shows you five-year rates, it does not mean you won't live for ten years. It also does not mean that if you survive five years, you have beaten cancer.

Several Ways to Calculate

Your doctor calculates survival percentages using several statistics. Some focus only on patient deaths caused by cancer. Some take into account deaths attributed to other causes as well. Some statistics compare groups of cancer patients to groups of similar people who do not have cancer. And some statistics focus on the number of patients who eventually became cancer free.

Conclusion

Not every patient wants to hear about survival statistics. For some, they are helpful. For others, they are distracting or overwhelming. Whether or not you decide to hear about these numbers is your choice. But if you do want this information, be sure you understand what the numbers mean. Review the statistics with your doctor so you understand exactly how they relate to you.