

Understanding the Importance of Shared Decisions



Health care decisions are never easy to make, especially when the decisions are complex such as considering a new therapy or participating in a clinical trial. Many health care professionals recognize this and are encouraging patients to play a more active role in making treatment decisions based on balancing evidence-based options with a patient's personal health outcome goals, preferences and values.

Shared decision-making is when patients, caregivers and health care professionals work together to make the health-related decisions that are best for the individual patient. This is an approach to decision making that considers input from patients as part of the planning process and works best when a patient wants to be part of their own treatment team.

There are many benefits to shared decision-making. This kind of doctor-patient collaboration may increase confidence in a treatment choice after careful consideration of both the benefits and risks. When patients participate in decision making and understand the outcomes, they may be more likely to follow through with a treatment plan.

In many situations, there is no clear or best option because choices about treatment, medical tests and health issues come with pros and cons. Shared decision-making is especially important when there is more than one reasonable option or when the possible benefits and risks of each option could affect patients differently.

If you would like to play a greater role in the decision-making process for yourself or a loved one, share with your provider that you'd like to be more involved in understanding your options and making decisions as a team.

Consider a scenario in which you could have an opportunity to take a more proactive role and share in the decision-making process. Perhaps a physician has recommended a new course of treatment. The first step toward making a collaborative decision is to have a two-way dialogue to fully understand all the options and how they could intersect with your current medical care and your life in general.

While each individual situation is different, here are a few questions to get the conversation started:

- What are my treatment options?
- Can I share with you what is important to me as we talk about these options?
- What are the risks and benefits of each?
- What is the goal of each option? Is it to treat the condition or improve the symptoms?
- How will each treatment make me feel?
- What are the side effects and how will they affect my quality of life?
- What does research say about each option's probability of success for situations similar to mine?
- What decision aids do you have that could help me make an informed decision? Decision aids are tools such as written materials, videos or websites that provide additional information about the possible outcomes and assist with making a treatment decision.



Other things to consider as you talk with your doctor include your desire to continue doing the activities that mean the most to you, the ability to care for yourself over time and any financial concerns you have.

As an active participant in your health care decision-making, you may need additional information to confidently participate in a discussion about your care. Other professional resources such as a nurse practitioner, social worker, nurse navigator, clinical trial study team or a patient advocacy organization can help patients obtain valuable and reliable information needed to make informed decisions.

Ultimately, shared decision-making is a process that involves two kinds of experts: providers and patients. A provider weighs the medical options and the evidence-based research. The patient understands his or her body, values and concerns. Together, these experts evaluate the treatment options and the patient's preferences prior to making a collaborative decision.

Key steps to participating in shared decision making:



Information: Request and gather all information about the treatment options, including the pros/cons, benefits/risks.



Support: Share personal goals, values, preferences and insurance coverage. Ask for support from family and friends as you review all options.



Discussion: Talk through options with your health care team and decide together based on medical evidence and personal needs. You may feel more comfortable inviting a trusted family member or friend to join you for these discussions.



Follow through: After making your decision, stay connected to your health care team to ask any follow up questions and keep them informed of your progress.

Learn More

Visit these resources for more information about playing a greater role in the decision-making process for yourself or a loved one.

National Patient Advocate Foundation | npaf.org/roadmap/shared-decision-making/

Mayo Clinic Shared Decision Making National Resource Center | carethatfits.org/shared-decision-making/