

# My friend has cancer. What can I do to help?

Lymphoma Foundation of America asked more than 100 lymphoma survivors to tell us what their friends and family members did for them that was helpful, comforting, and needed.

Here are their candid answers on what to say and do, and what not to say or do when someone you know has cancer.

**Understand the roller coaster.** Cancer patients are on a roller coaster. Their recovery has major ups and downs. Sometimes tests turn out great. Other times not so good. Patients feel strong and hopeful when treatments are working; anxious and fearful when results are disappointing. One day things are fine, the next day your friend feels sick. The journey to recovery is not predictable day to day, and each person reacts differently.

Remember to be flexible with your friend's changing moods and medical situation. (Certain medications can cause mood swings).

You can provide much needed support with your caring and compassion. Even a few tender words can go a long way.

**Stay calm.** A newly diagnosed cancer patient can be confused, frightened, sad, and angry. By the time you are shocked to learn that your friend has cancer, they are likely already having tests and beginning a treatment plan with their doctors.

Don't bring panic back into their life. Be calm, be thoughtful, and simply listen.

It is selfish to talk about yourself. Focus instead on your friend's needs and experiences. This journey is all about them, not you.

**Try on their shoes.** Put yourself in your friend's shoes. Imagine that you have been told you have cancer. How would you like to be treated by the people closest to you?

Above all, be kind. You might say: "*I'm here for you*" "*We'll get through this together*" "*I love you*" "*I think about you a lot*" "*You'll always look beautiful to me.*"

**Avoid saying:** "*You'll be fine*" "*Don't worry*" "*I'm sure you'll beat this*" "*Everything will be OK*" "*Your cancer is the good kind*" "*Stay positive*" "*You'll be back on your feet in no time.*"

**No comparing.** Do not compare your friend to people you know who had cancer. Just because Uncle Jim or Cousin Keisha recovered in record time, or your neighbor did

amazingly well by taking this or that medicine -- these examples are not helpful or comforting to a cancer patient.

There is an exception -- If you know someone personally who had the same type of cancer as your friend, and is now a long time survivor in good health, offer to contact that person to see if they might speak with your friend. Inspiration and reassurance are important. It is uplifting to hear firsthand from someone who lived through what your friend is facing.

Offer to find a cancer support group for your friend. Oftentimes local hospitals host support groups for patients who have the same type of cancer.

**Don't lie.** People know when they look sick. Don't lie and say "You're looking good!" Do not pretend that your friend is doing great when it's obvious that they are feeling wretched.

**Just be there.** And listen. With a warm heart.

**Forget "How are you?"** This question can be so annoying. Do not force someone to have to reassure you that they are OK, even when they are not feeling OK.

When your friend wants to talk with you about their medical situation, they will. In the meantime, do not push them to explain.

**Hugs Help.** Why not give your friend a warm hug now and then? Hugs are a welcome relief from feelings of loneliness and isolation.

**Ask if you can visit.** As a courtesy, ask your friend's permission if you can come visit. Do not be offended if the answer is no. Do not take it personally if they do not return your calls or texts. Try to understand that having visitors may be more than your friend can handle at that time.

If you do visit, make sure you are in good health, with no signs of a cold, cough, fever, flu, virus, or infection. When in doubt, stay home.

When visiting, do not expect your friend to "wait on you." Accept the fact that they may be too tired to do much of anything.

If your friend enjoys watching sports, why not visit when their favorite football or basketball team is on TV? That way, you can enjoy the game together. Ask if you can bring some yummy snacks along.

**Do not wear perfumes, fragrances, aftershave, heavy deodorants, scented lotions.** Many patients cannot tolerate smells, and find it hard to breathe around them.

**Do not preach.** Everyone has strong opinions. Please try to keep yours to yourself. It does not matter if you like or dislike your friend's choice of doctors or cancer center. Above all, do not insist on their avoiding certain diets or lifestyle changes. The majority of cancer patients say that they explore complimentary therapies, and many use them. Each patient has the right to make her or his own decisions. Respect your friend's choices.

Do not ask personal questions about a patient's sex life, religious beliefs, or political views. Avoid giving unsolicited advice about controversial subjects. Arguing is way too stressful and energy draining for someone who is ill. If your friend wants you to know something, he or she will tell you without being prompted.

**Keep everyone in the loop.** Most cancer patients want to keep their family and friends up to date on what is happening with their situation and treatments. It takes just 1 friend or family member to send out periodic emails or texts to everyone. You can set up a private message board on social media or online blog where people can add their own comments and send messages.

**Create a support team.** You can gather the names of people willing to help out with various errands and chores. Volunteers can decide which activities they wish to offer to do, and how often they will be available. Remember, it is not easy for a cancer patient to ask for help. You can ask for them.

**Help with chores and errands.** Some of the best things you can do are:

Shop for groceries ~ drop off or pick up children from school ~ clean a room or two at your friend's home ~ take out the trash ~ do laundry ~ knit a hat for your friend ~ shovel the snow in winter ~ do handyman-type repairs ~ bring toys for the children ~ take the dog for a walk ~ bring a play toy for the cat ~ help decorate for holidays and birthdays ~ pick up prescriptions ~ help schedule minor car repairs if needed ~ offer to video your friend's child playing in a sports tournament.

If you are a close family member, you might ask if your loved one is concerned about paying the bills. You can always say: "*If you run into a problem paying your (fill in the blank) bill, please let me know. I am here for you.*"

**Drop off a meal or snacks.** What a nice gesture to bring nourishing delicious food that arrives at the door, especially if there is enough for the family. Here are some things to keep in mind if you wish to cook a meal or buy carry-out:

- Your friend may be on a special diet because of the particular cancer treatments and medicines they are taking. Always ask first: “*What foods would you like me to bring?*”
- Many cancer patients are motivated to change their eating habits from junk food and fast food to home cooked healthy fresh foods. Do not criticize their switch. Accept that it may be part of their plan for healing.
- Ask if you can bring food from your friend’s favorite restaurant.
- Ask if you can bring some of your friend’s favorite snacks.

**Offer a ride.** Many patients need help with travel for doctor appointments and out-patient treatments at the hospital. If you can, offer to drive your friend. It is comforting for patients to have someone with them and not be alone when they go to the doctor.

**Surprise your friend with a gift.** Like everybody, cancer patients wish to get enough sleep, eat well, continue working at their job, relax with family and friends, and be with their children. If you want to give your friend a gift, you might consider:

~ pajamas, slippers, sox, blanket ~ a book of funny cartoons ~ kitchen items ~ a month’s trial subscription to movies on TV or a sports channel ~ a donation in their name to a lymphoma charity ~ knitted hat or scarf ~ first aid kit ~ foot stool ~ gift card to their favorite store ~ tickets to a sporting event or concert (if their health allows) ~ a Sunday drive in the park ~

**Do not bring flowers or plants in soil.** Many cancer patients have a compromised immune system and need to avoid exposures to bacteria and viruses.

**Bring a sense of humor.** Some people are born to be funny. If you are one of them, your sense of humor can lift a friend’s spirits. One lymphoma patient told us that when her hair started falling out in clumps from the chemo drugs, her best friend walked into the room and said with a smile: “*Bad hair day?*”

Laughter is good medicine. You can help your friend feel better by watching comedies with them, especially their favorite comedians, movies, and TV shows.

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