

Cancer patients want honesty, compassion from their oncologist

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What do patients want from their radiation oncologists? The most significant preference is that more than one-third of female cancer patients (37 percent) prefer to have their hands held by their radiation oncologists during important office visits, compared to 12 percent of men, according to a randomized study presented November 4, 2009, at the 51st Annual Meeting of the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO).

Another significant finding is that almost three-quarters of the patients (72 percent) preferred to be called by their first name, even among elderly patients. There is a greater preference for this among females than males (76 percent to 66 percent), and white patients compared to blacks (74 percent to 56 percent). The study also shows that while 95 percent of all patients want their oncologist to be honest with them about their chances of cure and expected survival, there is a significantly increased preference for honesty among [prostate cancer](#) patients versus lung cancer patients (97 to 91 percent).

"In oncology, a strong physician-patient relationship is essential because the patient's interactions with their doctor can help the patient confidently make life or death decisions, such as what cancer treatment is best for them," Ajay Bhatnagar, M.D., lead author of the study, a radiation oncologist at [Cancer Treatment Services International](#) in Casa Grande, Ariz., and Adjunct Assistant Professor of [Radiation Oncology](#) at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute in Pittsburgh said.

"Oncologists can use these results to provide greater [patient satisfaction](#)

for their patients, and therefore significantly improve patient care."

The study sought to find out what cancer patients wanted from their patient-doctor relationship and whether their physicians would be able to change their behaviors to satisfy their patients' preferences if they had knowledge of these preferences. The prospective randomized trial took place between June 2006 and March 2008 and involved 508 patients, who underwent radiation for breast, prostate or [lung cancer](#). Patients answered a survey about their preferences of their radiation oncologist, with a variety of questions focusing on the patient-doctor relationship. The survey was given at three time periods: prior to initial consultation, midpoint of radiation treatment, and at completion of radiation therapy.

The patients were randomized into two groups, based on whether their oncologist reviewed their initial patient preference survey responses (experimental group) or did not (control group). At time of completion, the patient also completed a satisfaction survey.

In addition to other findings, nearly three-quarters of all patients (70 percent) are neutral about their radiation oncologist wearing a white coat or professional clothing. The study also shows that 95 percent of high school graduates show a greater preference for having their radiation treatment described in everyday language by their radiation oncologists, compared to 91 percent of college graduates and 84 percent of post-graduate patients.

Source: American Society for Radiation Oncology

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