



Find Out if a Clinical Trial is Right for Your Cancer Treatment

As a cancer survivor, I know too well how overwhelming it is to make treatment decisions. First, you're reeling from the diagnosis. You're scared, confused and quite simply bamboozled by all you have to learn and all the decisions that have to be made.

Physicians often suggest that their patients with cancer consider participating in a clinical trial. This is an opportunity to receive leading-edge medical treatment. But the very word "trial" leaves us with lots of questions. How do I know it will be effective? What if I get a placebo? Is it the best treatment for me?

For answers, I went right to the expert: James Stewart, MD, an oncologist at UW Health and co-leader of Experimental Therapeutics in the UW Carbone Comprehensive Cancer Center. He explained that a clinical trial is one of the final stages of a long and careful research process. Researchers test new cancer treatments such as new drugs or combinations of drugs, different ways to use known cancer therapies, or new approaches to surgery or radiation therapy. The goal is to find safe, effective new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer.

"Clinical trials build on previous research to develop advances in cancer treatment," Dr. Stewart told me. "Many of the exciting new treatments today trace back to research begun several decades ago. Breast cancer is one area where a long history of research has created meaningful advances."

Not everyone is eligible to participate in a clinical trial, and even if you are eligible, it doesn't mean it is the best choice for you. "A clinical trial is usually appropriate for patients in whom standard therapy is less than reliably effective, too toxic, or where there really is no effective treatment," Dr. Stewart explained.

I asked Dr. Stewart about the benefits of participating in a clinical trial. He told me that patients in a research study may gain access to promising new treatments long before they become publicly available. Research participants are cared for by leading physicians in cancer research, and typically receive more individualized care and closer monitoring than those not participating in a clinical trial. And, of course, participants have the chance to make a valuable contribution to cancer research.

So what are the drawbacks? Most people don't participate in a clinical trial until the trial reaches Phase 3, when the treatment has already gone through a great deal of testing in the lab, on animals and on other patients. Still, the treatment might have serious side effects or risks that researchers have not yet discovered. It might prove to be ineffective, or less effective than the current best known treatment. Dr. Stewart emphasized that, although there is never a 100 percent guarantee that the treatment will

be safe and effective, clinical trials are very carefully designed to safeguard the health of participants. They are intensely reviewed at multiple levels.

Many patients fear they will receive a placebo. But Dr. Stewart assured me that placebos are rarely, if ever, used. Most clinical trials don't compare a new treatment against a placebo; they compare the standard treatment versus a possibly better treatment. If a placebo might be used, the physician will tell you right up front, before you decide to participate.

In the past many insurance plans did not cover even routine treatment considered "experimental". However, Wisconsin's Cancer Patient Protection Act ensures that cancer patients in Wisconsin who participate in a clinical trial will receive the same insurance coverage as those receiving conventional treatment. The clinical trial study coordinator can help you work with your insurance company.

When deciding if a clinical trial is a good option, Dr. Stewart recommends you first do some research, then ask your doctor plenty of questions. The National Cancer Institute webpage at www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials is an excellent resource, with lots of background information about clinical trials, a listing of clinical trials across the country, and state-by-state resources. If you are interested in pursuing trials at the UWCCC call Cancer Connect at 1-800-622-8922. The US National Institutes of Health has a wealth of information on its web site at www.clinicaltrials.gov. These web sites will also provide you with numerous questions to ask your doctor.

Take matters into your own hands and find out if a clinical trial is right for you.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

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