

Treatments

What kind of treatment does a brain tumor require?

Treatments are recommended based on the type of tumor, the size and location, the patient's medical history, age, and current health. Standard treatments include surgery to remove as much of the tumor as possible, radiation therapy to shrink or kill tumor cells, chemotherapy drugs to kill fast growing cells, and steroids to reduce swelling.

Before consenting to recommended treatment, be sure to ask some important questions. What is the purpose and likely outcome of the treatment? Are there any other treatment options to consider? What are the risks involved? What side effects can be expected and what can be done to ease them? How will the treatments affect daily activities and quality of life? It is very important that you feel comfortable with your physician and with the treatment plan. Your doctor will likely consult with a team of specialists before recommending treatments and will offer you the best care possible. If you do not feel comfortable, seek out other medical opinions until you find a treatment plan that feels right for you.

What can I expect when having brain surgery?

Many brain tumors are treated with surgery. The purpose of surgery is to remove as much of the tumor as possible, establish an exact diagnosis, and provide access to the tumor site for other treatments. Surgery to remove a brain tumor is called a craniotomy. In most cases, the neurosurgeon cuts into the scalp and removes a piece of the skull to expose the area of the brain over the tumor. In some cases, surgeons can reach tumors by entering the skull through the sinus cavities. Computer imaging allows detailed brain mapping to be used to minimize damage to surrounding tissues. Once the tumor is located, the neurosurgeon will remove as much as possible. Following surgery, your medical team will be on hand to answer any questions you have and help you recover.

What is radiation therapy?

Many brain tumors are radiosensitive; their cells will shrink and die after exposure to radiation. Radiation therapy is used for both "benign" and "malignant tumors". There are several different methods for delivering radiation to the treatment area, as well as varying dosages and schedules. As with any treatment, be sure to discuss radiation fully with your doctor and make sure you feel comfortable with the recommended treatment. Radiation therapy is generally not painful, but there are a variety of potential side effects that you and your doctor will discuss. New radiation therapies are constantly under development. The Support section of this website contains links to many sites that can provide detailed information on updated treatment options. Support groups are also great forums for sharing experiences and getting tips to help handle radiation treatments and its side effects.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of special drugs designed to kill tumor cells. These drugs can target tumors because cells that are actively dividing absorb them. Some normal cells can also be affected, such as those that produce hair, blood, and skin. Your doctor can discuss these potential side effects with you in detail. As with radiation therapy, there are many different kinds of chemotherapy and several different ways the drugs are delivered. Researchers work diligently to bring us new drugs and hope for a cure. New treatments are tested on patients in clinical trials at many major medical centers. Check the Support section of this web site for many resources regarding chemotherapy and research clinical trials. If your treatments have you sidelined from support group meetings, be sure to use the Message Board here to find friends with tips and experience dealing with chemotherapy.

Will my brain tumor come back?

As with any cancer, it is possible that a brain tumor will recur. Cancer cells can often survive even the most successful treatment regimen. In addition, it is not uncommon for low grade tumors to recur as a higher grade tumor, or even for a “benign” tumor to recur as “malignant”. That said, many brain tumors are treated successfully the first time out and do not recur.

How can I better understand my diagnosis and keep track of all my treatments?

Being diagnosed with a brain tumor is an emotionally traumatic and confusing event. It is very difficult to take in the news and be aware enough to understand all the information flying at you at a critical pace. There are things that you can do to get through it as smoothly as possible. First, always carry paper and take notes, or have someone take notes for you. Ask your doctor to spell out any medical terms that have you confused. Write down the descriptions, dates and times of your symptoms so you don't have to rely on memory when meeting with your doctor. With help if you need it, keep a log while in the hospital and while receiving other therapies. Keep a separate list of all treatments you have received with dates, locations and doctors' names. Always keep an up to date list of the medications you are taking with you. Before you go to your appointments, write down any questions you have for your doctor. Use the links provided in this web site to gather more information, but be careful to not overwhelm yourself with too much disturbing information. Use the support group as a resource for advice from those who have been through this before. Allow your loved ones to care for you in your time of need and seek out spiritual support if it gives you comfort.