

IS IT TIME FOR A SECOND OPINION?

There are many reasons to seek a second opinion, but it takes some knowledge and planning to get one and understand how to use it.

By Jim Trageser

THOSE WHO HAVE undergone surgery have probably heard this rule of thumb: Never go under the knife without getting a second opinion. In fact, many insurers won't authorize surgical procedures without a second specialist reviewing test results or images (X-rays, CT scans, MRIs, etc.), and possibly conducting a separate exam that supports the same conclusion about the proper course of action.

But what if there is no diagnosis? Or, what if a physician seems less than confident about your diagnosis? Or, what if the diagnosis doesn't seem to fit your symptoms? These could also be times when it makes sense to seek a second opinion. For instance, most families who have loved ones treated with immune globulin (IG) therapy endure a lengthy insurance approval process. And, many times, approval comes without a firm diagnosis. In fact, sometimes IG therapy is tried in lieu of a diagnosis. In addition, patients treated with IG often continue to experience symptoms that have not responded to initial treatments. While IG therapy may be effective in treating one set of symptoms, patients and their families are left struggling with other unresolved symptoms, causing confusion, panic and exhaustion. Getting a second opinion can help alleviate some of these emotions, as well as provide further insight and, perhaps, new options for treatment.

Why Seek a Second Opinion?

The Cleveland Clinic's Verywell Health portal recommends seeking a second opinion for any rare disease diagnosis. In fact, when a disease affects only a limited number of people, the odds of a misdiagnosis increase.¹ The portal also recommends a second opinion for any life-altering treatment, as well as treatment that has been started but is not easing symptoms. The American Cancer Society also offers several reasons for getting a second opinion,² ranging from physicians not being open to a new treatment or expressing uncertainty about a diagnosis, to patients receiving a rare disease diagnosis or having trouble understanding and communicating with their doctor.

In fact, connecting with a physician is more important than it might seem: Treating an underlying health challenge is a team effort, and if patients and their physicians are not on the same page, it can undermine patient health. Locating a doctor with whom a patient can connect doesn't make the previous doctor a poor one (or the patient flawed), it means if there's another specialist the patient feels more comfortable with, there is nothing wrong with making a change.

The Mayo Clinic has a downloadable brochure titled “Tips for Seeking a Second Opinion”³ that states, “Getting a second opinion can help you feel more confident about your diagnosis and treatment plan.” As Lonnie Fynskov, RN, a nurse practitioner with the Mayo Clinic, explains, “Dealing with a serious condition can be very stressful, so it’s important to have confidence in your treatment options and providers. No one wants to second-guess themselves later on. If you feel the need for extra clarity and assurance, don’t be afraid to ask for a second opinion. Your peace of mind will definitely make it worthwhile.”

The Patient Advocate Foundation also has a brochure on seeking second opinions that states: “By seeking a second opinion, you will become more informed about all of your available treatment options and even have a better sense of possible side effects of each. Learning more about your condition and your treatment will help you feel more in control of your health and ensure that you are making the best decision for you.”⁴

Beyond feelings of empowerment, there is the practical side. As the Mayo Clinic brochure explains, “Doctors may have different diagnoses or offer different treatment options based on their background. Doctors might have varied experience when it comes to treating your disease, working with technology and approaches based on training and experience.” Doctors’ personalities and philosophies also vary. The Mayo Clinic phrases it this way: “Some doctors take a more conservative, or traditional, approach to treating their patients. Other doctors are more aggressive and use the newest tests and therapies.” Therefore, finding a doctor whose approach mirrors a patient’s philosophy is important.

Finally, maybe the most important reason for seeking a second opinion is doctors are human and make mistakes. A 2017 study by the Mayo Clinic found one in five patients who sought a second opinion received a completely different diagnosis.⁵ This doesn’t mean the first diagnosis was wrong, but it does indicate medical error exists, and getting a second opinion (and additional opinions if the first two diagnoses conflict) is critical.

What it boils down to: If a patient is not 100 percent sure about the diagnosis or treatment plan, he or she should get a second opinion or even a third.

Finding the Right Second Opinion

Getting a second opinion is only useful if it is an informed opinion. Thus, the first step in seeking a second opinion is to find a physician who is experienced in treating patients with their condition. A patient’s primary care physician should be able to refer a qualified colleague.

However, if the primary care physician made the initial diagnosis, and the patient is uncomfortable asking her or him for a referral, there are other options. Patients can find physicians who treat their condition by conducting an online search. Or, most disease-specific support groups, research foundations and other organizations maintain databases of physicians specializing in specific conditions, and can provide a referral to a nearby specialist. If choosing either of these methods, patients should ensure the specialist will accept their insurance plan. If acceptance is denied, or if the physician is out-of-network, the charges should be agreed upon ahead of time.

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Insurance company case managers and patient advocates can also assist patients in finding a qualified specialist to provide a second opinion, as well as determine what the plan will cover.

When Getting the Second Opinion

No doubt, for a second opinion, it’s important patients get the most out of it. Here’s how:

First, the reason for seeking a second opinion and what the expectations are should be made very clear. For instance, is the patient looking for a completely new evaluation or confirmation of the original diagnosis? Are there doubts about the current diagnosis and, if so, why? Are other treatment options available for the diagnosis? Having this conversation up front will greatly increase the odds of a patient leaving the consultation with the desired information.

Undoubtedly, most laypeople are unfamiliar with specialized medical terminology. Thus, if what the doctor says during the exam and diagnosis is not understood, the patient should not be afraid to ask questions. And, in fact, should keep asking until the doctor's findings are understood. It can be helpful to have a family member or trusted friend accompany the patient and take notes during the doctor's explanation. The patient can also ask the doctor if it's OK to record the consultation to refer to it later.

The American Cancer Society recommends asking the physician for any brochures or other printed materials explaining the condition being diagnosed, as well as any proposed treatments.

Before the visit, ask the scheduler if the patient should bring copies of any tests or scans the original physician ordered. With many medical records now stored electronically, the original physician may be able to share them digitally. Having these files ahead of time will help the second physician determine if additional tests or scans might be helpful.

Also, if after getting a second (or even third) diagnosis the patient decides to be treated by the new physician, this choice should be clearly communicated to both doctors so they can coordinate the handoff and make sure all tests and relevant medical records are consolidated.

Barriers to Seeking a Second Opinion

Most often, the biggest obstacle when seeking a second opinion is the patient! Typically, patients are embarrassed to tell their doctor they want a second opinion because they don't want to question his or her expertise or professionalism. In fact, more than a third of Americans facing a serious medical decision never seek a second opinion.⁶

The American Cancer Society shares the following talking points patients can use to break the ice with their doctor if they're feeling apprehensive:

- I'm thinking of getting a second opinion. Can you recommend someone?
- Before we start treatment, I'd like to get a second opinion. Will you help me with that?
- If you had my type of cancer, who would you see for a second opinion?
- I think I'd like to talk with another doctor to be sure I have all my bases covered.

As the Verywell Health patient portal points out: "You are not being difficult nor are you in denial about your situation

when you ask for a second opinion. You are being smart and empowered. You should always take an active role in your healthcare, and getting a second opinion is an important part of that process." And, any hesitancy by the original doctor about seeking a second opinion should raise a red flag — not necessarily about the diagnosis or treatment, but about whether this is the right doctor for the patient.

What to Do with the Second Opinion

If the second opinion confirms the diagnosis or treatment plan, it's still a good idea for patients to visit with their first doctor and go over the notes from the second. Even if the diagnoses are the same, there may be details or insights the original doctor hadn't considered. In fact, the Mayo Clinic study comparing first and second opinions found while two-thirds of the second opinions confirmed the original diagnosis, they refined or added to it. (Only 12 percent of second opinions were largely identical to the first).⁶

But when the second opinion diverges significantly from the original, things get a bit more complicated. The American Cancer Society recommends requesting the doctors meet to review their diagnoses together, ideally with the patient present. This can be done either in person or virtually (something that the COVID-19 pandemic has made everyone more comfortable with).²

If the two diagnoses are at odds, one of them must be wrong, so it can still be a good idea to have the original physician review the notes from the latest diagnosis. Perhaps something was discovered that was originally overlooked, or maybe the second doctor is uniquely experienced in an area that is not the area of expertise of the first doctor. It may be reviewing the notes from the second consultation will lead the first doctor to revise his or her own diagnosis.

If after consultation and further review, the two doctors still disagree, it's time to explore a third opinion. 

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