



HSE National Cancer Control Programme

18 October 2022

Advice for patients on accessing evidence-based cancer care

Ireland's health system provides a comprehensive and high-quality cancer care and treatment service, offering people living with cancer in Ireland access to a wide range of treatment protocols and supports.

Sometimes, a patient might have questions about treatment options that are not available in Ireland, or that are being offered outside of the services provided by their cancer care team.

Our services

Our public health service provides people with evidence-based care and support, with access to innovative treatments with quality care outcomes. Depending on the disease or illness a person might experience, they will likely be in the care of a specialist cancer team, including doctors, nurses, specialists in medical or radiation oncology, and a range of other supportive health professionals.

Care and treatment for cancer is provided at a range of sites, and our clinical services are networked together so that quality of care is standardised across the country as much as possible.

Services outside Ireland

There are mechanisms in place to allow people to access medical treatment or interventions abroad in appropriate clinical circumstances. These include access via the European Health Insurance Card, the Treatment Abroad Scheme and the Cross Boarder Directive.

You can read more about these services on the hse.ie website.

Access to these services operates under the guidance of patients' clinical teams. The process includes an assessment of the benefit of the treatment and its evidence base for people with the same condition. In many cases, access to care abroad is clinically appropriate and many people are supported each year to access this care. There may also be cases where treatments available abroad do not have a good evidence base, or may not be suitable for a person's particular disease.

The HSE advises that patients, along with their family or a trusted advocate, discuss the value of any potential treatment with their clinical team, and explore the options for accessing evidence-based treatment abroad under these existing schemes.

Alternative therapies

People living with cancer often have to adjust to the challenge of treatments, and the overall impact of their illness on themselves and their wider family and circle. People often choose to access supportive therapies or activities that can help improve their symptoms and their wellbeing, from healthy eating to therapies like acupuncture.

However, our expert cancer services and clinicians are aware that, sometimes, people might be considering alternative therapies that claim to prevent, effect, treat or cure cancer, without having a proven evidence base for those claims. While this is a relatively rare conflict, our expert team are aware of cases where alternative therapies taken up instead of standard treatment lead to people's cancer continuing to grow. Some types of alternative therapy may not be safe and could be irreversibly harmful for a patient's health.

Making treatment choices can be difficult, especially if a person has advanced disease, and they and their family may be facing a very difficult future. It can be difficult to distinguish the differences between what might make someone feel better, what will give them best chance of getting rid of their cancer, what is safe and what risks are involved in receiving these treatments.

The HSE advises that patients, along with their family or a trusted advocate, discuss the value of any potential treatment with their clinical team, and explore the options for accessing evidence-based treatment, or safe complementary therapies, following that discussion.

People living with cancer can also call the Irish Cancer Society's Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or drop into a Daffodil Centre in one of 13 hospitals nationwide to speak to one of their specialist cancer nurses.

A free copy of their booklet 'Understanding Cancer and complementary therapies' is also available on request or by visiting cancer.ie. For more information visit www.hse.ie

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