Getting to Grips with General Practice

A guide to general practice for young people 15-25 years old who have had a diagnosis of cancer
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Publication information

Why develop this resource? Young people who have experienced cancer report that they often do not have a regular General Practitioner (GP) that they feel comfortable with, or are unsure about what role GPs could have in their cancer care. This resource has been developed to provide young people with information on the importance of having a GP and the role GPs play both during cancer treatment and in the years beyond.

How we developed this resource: The development of this resource was funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. It was developed through collaboration between the ONTrac at Peter Mac Victorian Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Service and the Victorian and Tasmanian Youth Cancer Action Board. The content was developed from focus groups and consultations with young people who have experienced a diagnosis of cancer between the ages of 15-25 years and a range of health care professionals from across the primary care and oncology sectors.

Acknowledgements: We wish to thank the many young people who willingly shared their personal stories with us to make this resource relevant to young people who are experiencing cancer. In particular our thanks go to the project team, Lucy Holland (writer) and Christie Allan and Laura Langdon for their leadership and enthusiasm.


Design: Green Scribble

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This resource is a general guide. It is not a substitute for expert medical, legal or financial advice. It is also not to be used as a guide for responding to medical or urgent medical issues. All care was taken to ensure that the information was accurate at the time of publication.
“Before I got cancer I hadn’t been to see a GP in years, but these days I’m a frequent flyer.”

Health relates to wellbeing across three domains; our body (physical health), mind and emotions (mental health) and our interaction with the world and other people (social health). Making sure that our health is the best it can be is essential to ensure we live the best life we can.

If you have been diagnosed with cancer, you will know how important it is to have a team of trusted health care professionals involved in your care. A key member of your health care team is the General Practitioner or GP (also known as a family or local doctor). GPs are really important because they specialise in general health. They have skill and expertise in treating a range of health concerns, linking you with the right support networks, helping you to navigate the health system and coordinating your care.

However, a lot of young people who have had a diagnosis of cancer tell us that they don’t have a regular GP. So, this resource has been developed to help you to understand why having a GP is important, what GPs can offer, how GPs work and how to best engage with GPs to maximise your health and wellbeing both now and into the future.
How to use this resource

You can read the entire resource or choose to read the section that is most relevant to you.
This resource covers...

What young people tell us...
What young people tell us about GPs

Your health...
Why good health is important; your health & cancer; identifying your health needs; health care teams

What is a GP?
What does a GP do?...
GPs & cancer - what a GP can do for you

How GPs work...
GP practices; GP appointments; Medicare & costs; medical records & your health information; confidentiality

Managing your health & working with your GP...
How to find the right GP; communication & talking to your GP about cancer; be your own best friend - what you can do

Last Word...
Take home messages

More...
Additional resources & useful links; Bibliography
To navigate this resource, look out for the icons that tell you:

- **Good to Know** (interesting facts)
- **Helpful Tips**
- **Real Life Stories** (what young people tell us)
- **More Information** (See useful links at the end of the resource)
What young people tell us about GPs

“I’ve never been really sick before being diagnosed with cancer and so until I was diagnosed I hadn’t really seen a GP.”

“It can be hard to know how to approach or talk to a GP. It can be scary.”

“Sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed going to the GP with something that seems really minor. It could be nothing but might be something and so, um, I feel like I’m wasting their time sometimes.”
Young people tell us that there are many reasons for not having a regular GP. This includes being healthy prior to cancer, not knowing how to find a good GP, being embarrassed, not knowing how to talk about health concerns, not being able to afford to see a GP and worry that a GP might share information with others without permission.

“I presented to the GP with my initial symptoms and she sent me off for ultrasounds and x-rays, blood tests and a CT scan. She made all the referrals from there and followed me through the process.”

“I see my GP if I have any cancer concerns, because I live in the country and it’s such a long way for me to go see other specialists.”

Having a GP that you can trust and who will provide care and support throughout your cancer experience is very important. GPs can provide care for a broad range of health issues including:

- Cancer prevention and health education
- Screening tests to ensure early diagnosis
- Help to navigate and coordinate care across the health system
- Provide referrals to other health specialists
- Symptom management and other cancer and treatment related concerns (in conjunction with the hospital oncology team)
- Looking after your general health
- Sexual health
- Reproductive health
- Mental health
It is really important to find a GP who you can build a good relationship with and whom you trust. This will help you feel more comfortable talking about your health and confident that your health needs will be met. You will also know where to go when you have a question or concern about your health.

You may also find that the role of the GP becomes especially important as you come to the end of treatment, when regular contact with the oncology team reduces. At this time, the GP becomes the point of contact for your health needs. They can also provide a lot of reassurance about health worries.

"Now that I’m only seeing my oncologist every six months my GP has taken on a more important role."

Knowing what a GP can do for your health and how to engage with a GP is important. A GP can help you to achieve your best health and live your best life, wherever you are in terms of your cancer experience.
Your health
WHY GOOD HEALTH IS IMPORTANT

Good health means that you are doing as well as you can in terms of your body and how it works (physical health), your mind, thoughts and emotions (mental health) and how you interact with your social world (social health).

If a health issue presents itself it is important to seek help from a health care professional or team who can support you to resolve, minimise or manage these issues and improve your health and wellbeing.

YOUR HEALTH & CANCER

“When you’ve been going through this cancer wringer for a while, you know a lot about your own health and about the body.”

When you have experienced a cancer diagnosis, not only do you get to know a lot about your own health, you also become very familiar with the impacts of cancer and treatment. Alongside your cancer you will also, from time to time, experience general health issues.

Understanding some of the common health issues experienced by young people who have had cancer may help you to identify areas of your own health that could be improved. Everyone experiences their health differently. The important thing to know is that your health concerns can be managed with support from your health care team (see Health Care Team).
### Common health concerns of young people who have experienced cancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Physical Health Issues</th>
<th>Common Mental Health Issues</th>
<th>Common Social Health Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain, swelling or scarring, tingling or numbness</td>
<td>Depression or low mood</td>
<td>Changed relationships or problems with family members or partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical changes to mobility, weight, hearing, eyesight and/or hair</td>
<td>Anxiety, excessive worry in general, lots of worry about the future and/or cancer returning</td>
<td>Changed relationships with friends, withdrawal from others or social isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes to sexual function</td>
<td>Persistent sadness, crying or a sense of grief or loss</td>
<td>Feeling like other people don’t understand you or your experience or concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty concentrating, remembering things or understanding information</td>
<td>Anger, irritability, lashing out, frustration or feelings of guilt</td>
<td>Not engaging in normal activities or things you usually enjoy like school, work or hobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes to problem solving or planning skills</td>
<td>Emotional fatigue or tiredness, lack of motivation</td>
<td>Not having a safe place to live or experiencing problems at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing impact of cancer on potential future fertility</td>
<td>Mood changes (e.g. low mood, anxiety etc.)</td>
<td>Disruption to or problems with school, study or work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing potential future chronic health conditions</td>
<td>Changed sense of self or a loss of confidence</td>
<td>Problems with money, financial stress or legal concerns</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
IDENTIFYING YOUR HEALTH NEEDS

Your health is always changing and everyone’s health and health needs are different. Having a record of your health history will help you to understand the things that support your best health and to know which areas could be improved. The My Health Story resource provided may help you to identify the important health events in your life. This can also be used to help you talk to other people about your health, including your GP.

My Health Story

Name: _________________________________ Date: __ / ___ / ___

Health History

It is often helpful to write down notes about your health history, e.g. past immunisations (and dates), diagnoses, treatments, scans, mental or social health needs and any relevant family history.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancer story</td>
<td>e.g. diagnoses, treatments and procedures, medications and future cancer care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General physical health</td>
<td>e.g. current symptoms or concerns (i.e. increasing pain, new or ongoing side effects of treatment, worry about a fever or lump, hair loss etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>e.g. current sense of wellbeing, symptoms or concerns (i.e. feeling really sad lately, having lost interest in doing things you normally enjoy, being overly worried about things etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social health</td>
<td>e.g. current concerns (i.e. not having a safe place to live, relationship worries or recent changes to relationships that are hard to manage, being really worried about money etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>e.g. current needs (i.e. needing to know about options for Centrelink, information about dental options, about your health care rights or information for family about long term effects of cancer etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HEALTH CARE TEAM

Your health care team is the group of people that support you to maintain your best health. This team will include you, often family and friends, and many health care professionals. Your team may be:

- A GP (see All about GPs)
- Specialist doctors for particular health conditions, including oncologists
- Nurses in the community and/or hospital
- Allied health professionals including: psychologist, social worker, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, dietitian, exercise physiologist etc.
- Pharmacists
- Dentists
- Other health care professionals
- You, your family and your friends

The My Health Care Team resource provided can help you to identify the key members of your health care team and the role they play to support your health. This can also be a good resource to give to family, friends and your GP so they know who is involved in your health care and who does what.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Member</th>
<th>Names/Contact Details</th>
<th>Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. identifying health needs, exercising, eating well, sleeping, taking medications, attending appointments etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your GP</td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. supporting my physical, mental and social health needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist doctors</td>
<td>e.g. surgical oncologist</td>
<td>e.g. surgery and reviews etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. medical oncologist</td>
<td>e.g. chemotherapy and reviews etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. radiation oncologist</td>
<td>e.g. radiotherapy and reviews etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. psychiatrist</td>
<td>e.g. mental health support for anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>e.g. cancer care coordinator</td>
<td>e.g. coordinating my hospital care and reviews, blood tests and scans etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. general practice nurse</td>
<td>e.g. coordinating my general health, blood tests, immunisations, sexual health, lifestyle education etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied health</td>
<td>e.g. physiotherapist</td>
<td>e.g. rehabilitation after surgery etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. occupational therapist</td>
<td>e.g. helping me to make sure I can manage at home etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. psychologist or social worker</td>
<td>e.g. strategies to manage anxiety, social wellbeing, finances etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. education and vocation coordinator</td>
<td>e.g. helping me with school and university applications etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>e.g. mum</td>
<td>e.g. reminding me about medications, supporting me when I feel bad etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. dad</td>
<td>e.g. taking me to appointments, helping me understand health information etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. brother/sister</td>
<td>e.g. fun and sports and supporting me when I feel sad etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>e.g. Tom</td>
<td>e.g. taking me to appointments, exercising with me etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. Samira</td>
<td>e.g. supporting me when I feel down etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>e.g. dentist</td>
<td>e.g. oral and mouth care etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. sports coach</td>
<td>e.g. maintaining and building fitness etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. yoga teacher</td>
<td>e.g. meditation and relaxation etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Embarrassment was also an issue for me at first but now I’ve built a pretty high threshold with that sort of thing. I will go in to the GP and be, like, ‘Yeah. I need you to prescribe this for me because I’ve got raging diarrhoea’. I realise now he’s used to it - so it doesn’t bother me so much anymore.”
What is a GP & what do they do?
You are an expert in how you feel and your body. You also probably have a good idea about what your oncology team can do for you, but the role of the GP may be less clear. So, read on...

**WHAT IS A GP?**

"Having a good GP is definitely a must."

GPs are doctors that specialise in general health and are trained to help you with any issue that affects your physical, mental or social health.

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**Good to Know: Facts about GPs**

GPs...

- Take a whole-of-person approach to health and can treat and/or refer to other health professionals to manage a range of health issues
- Provide low cost or free health care throughout your life
- Usually work in the community (rather than in hospitals)
- Usually work in centres called GP practices. These are also known as GP clinics, medical centres, medical practices or medical clinics
- Work with a practice team that usually includes other GPs, nurses (called general practice nurses) and other allied health professionals
- May work full time or part time
- Often have a special interest in working with particular groups of people (e.g. young people) or specific health issues (e.g. chronic illnesses like cancer or mental health)
- Work with other health care professionals in your health care team
WHAT DOES A GP DO?

“I definitely think that the psychosocial thing is something that needs to be made clearer - GPs can provide support and referrals for mental health, emotional support and social support as well as medical care.”

GPs provide care across all areas of health. Together with your GP, you can make a plan to explore your health concerns and address them. This will often involve the GP asking you questions about what concerns you. It may also involve the GP:

- Examining your body (e.g. listening to your heart, looking in your ears, examining your abdomen etc.)
- Ordering tests or scans (e.g. blood tests, x-rays, CT scans or ultrasound etc)
- Prescribing medication or treatment for you
- Referring you to other health care professionals, services or supports for further exploration of the problem or for specialist treatment and care (e.g. physiotherapy for a sore knee or a psychologist for low mood and worry)
- Giving you information (e.g. information about a specific health condition or concern, treatment options, referral options and supports, your health rights etc.)
- Putting a plan in place for follow up to check how you are and how things are going
- Coordinating care between all health care professionals who are part of your health care team
GPS & CANCER: WHAT A GP CAN DO FOR YOU

“Very, very fortunately I had a great relationship with my GP. Potentially I wouldn’t have gone to a doctor so soon when my symptoms started if I didn’t have that established relationship.”

In terms of cancer, the GP has an important role from the time of diagnosis, throughout treatment and beyond. GPs are usually the doctors that detect cancer, make referrals to your oncology team and work alongside this team during treatment. This is why it is so important to have a GP that you feel comfortable with and trust. For people affected by cancer, roles of the GP may include:

• Being a first point of contact for any new symptoms, aches, pains or problems with how your body feels and works, or mental health or social health concerns

• Helping with the management of cancer treatment and side effects. This will be negotiated between you, your GP and oncology team but your GP may arrange blood tests, monitoring and scans, manage side effects, coordinate pain and symptom management and palliative care, help you with dietary and exercise needs, coordinate mental health care (e.g. psychology support) or social care (e.g. social work support)

• Preventative care to protect your health and reduce the chances of future cancers. This can involve ordering tests and reviewing results

• Referring you back to cancer specialists if further support is required

• Providing care for general health concerns (these are things that your oncology team don’t manage). These include providing care for:
  - Colds and flu
  - General and travel immunisations
  - Contraception and other sexual health concerns
  - Mental health concerns and mood changes
  - Social health challenges including concerns with school, work, family and friends etc.

• Providing management for chronic diseases and associated care and coordination
Good to Know: Chronic Disease Management

If you have a chronic health condition that is likely to last for 6 months or more (like cancer) you may be eligible for a GP initiated chronic disease management plan (GPMP). These are designed to help coordinate your complex care needs across your health team. A GPMP identifies all the people involved in your care, notes any current and potential health issues and sets out your care goals.

If you have complex health needs and need ongoing care from a multidisciplinary team that includes your GP and at least two other health providers (these may include doctors, nurses and allied health professionals), you may also be eligible for a Team Care Arrangement (TCA). TCAs help you to access certain allied health services at a reduced cost. Your GP can arrange this and also advise about what fees, if any, you may have to pay for these services (See Costs).

GPMPs and TCAs cannot be made without your agreement or consent. If you and your GP decide to create a GPMP or TCA there may be a cost depending on how your GP charges for your appointments, so it’s worth asking your GP about this. If you decide to create a GPMP or TCA, you will do this together with your GP and you will receive a copy of the plan or any arrangements made.

Good to Know: Better Access to Mental Health Care & Mental Health Care Plans

Sometimes mental health worries are really difficult to talk about. It is just as important to look after your mental health as your physical health. Better Access to Mental Health Care aims to improve mental health support by enabling access to mental health services provided by GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists or social workers.

If you and your GP think these services will help, you may be eligible for a Mental Health Care Plan. This means you can access up to 10 individual or group sessions with a mental health professional each year. This may mean low cost or free support. It is worth asking your GP about costs - see Medicare & costs. If you require additional support after 10 sessions it is important to talk to your GP.
"My GP has known me my whole life and when I was diagnosed she rang me and my parents to get us to come in and tell us. So I have had her ever since and she’s been great. My oncologist and my surgeon would send her letters and stuff and it was good. I’d go to see her about something and she knew what was going on. Still now, if I have any shortness of breath or I find like a lump or something on my body, I go and see her straightaway and she sends me for an x-ray or an ultrasound or an MRI or something like that, no questions asked."

"After diagnosis, my health care, cancer-wise, was taken over by my oncologist but I still saw my GP for things like medical certificates for Centrelink, blood tests, flu shots and immunisations. If I brought up something with my oncologist that I thought could be cancer-related but wasn’t, he’d just say, ‘no, you need to go and see your GP’. He directed me back to my GP for anything that was clearly not related to my cancer. Now my treatment has finished, I see the GP for any general health concerns. If I had a lump or something come up I would see him, especially if my appointment with the oncologist was a long way away."

"Last year I had a really bad infection. I was over a year in remission and I went and saw the GP, like, twice in a week. She called up my specialist and said ‘Ellie’s here with me. This is the issue, what do you want me to do?’ She communicated with my specialist there and then."
How GPs work
This section tells you important things to know about how GPs work. This information aims to make you feel more confident knowing how GPs work, how the appointment system works and what to expect when you see a GP.

“I think if you’re unfamiliar with how the system works then you’re more likely to have a negative experience when you see your GP.”

**GP PRACTICES**

GPs work in practices that are based in the community (i.e. outside hospitals). These can be called medical centres, medical practices, medical clinics or GP clinics. The structure of the GP practice and how they run varies between practices. Usually practices have nurses (called general practice nurses) and other allied health professionals, such as psychologists, physiotherapists, dietitians, podiatrists and other professionals.

**Good to Know: About general practice nurses**

General practice nurses play a big role in terms of health care and may be responsible for immunisations, wound management, blood tests, sexual health checks, lifestyle advice and provide another point of contact for general health concerns. The general practice nurse can also come in with you while you are seeing the GP if you are feeling nervous and would like their support while you are having specific investigations (e.g. blood tests, Pap test etc.)

**Good to Know: Where GPs work**

GPs usually work in GP practices but may also work in schools and universities. These can be good places to find a convenient, local GP. For other ways to find a GP see How to Find the Right GP.
GP APPOINTMENTS

GPs offer a range of appointments throughout the week. A standard appointment usually lasts 10 to 15 minutes and is intended for addressing 1-2 simple issues. If it is your first appointment, you have complex needs to discuss, or have multiple things to discuss with your GP, it is important to book a long appointment that usually lasts 20 to 30 minutes. A long appointment gives the GP enough time to get to know you and for you to get to know them. It also means they can address most of your concerns or questions at the one time. If you are unsure, the receptionists at the GP practice can usually help you to decide how long an appointment you need.

Good to Know: What if I don’t know what to say or I don’t understand?

Sometimes it can be scary talking about your health and hard to know where to start. It can feel confusing. This is ok and lots of people feel overwhelmed from time to time - especially in a new environment and with new people. Remember that health professionals are there to help you. Check out Communication & talking with your GP.

Good to Know: Seeing different GPs

While it can be good to have one GP that you know, trust and feel comfortable with, it is ok to see other GPs at the same practice if you need to. Other GPs in the practice will be able to access your health information through the practice health records system so they will be able to understand your health history and can help you (see Medical records and your health information and Confidentiality).

Good to Know: You are in control

It is important that you feel comfortable throughout the appointment and that you understand everything that is happening and what is said. You don’t have to make decisions there and then. You can take some time to go away and decide about options or what you want to do. You can also ask for more information from the GP or go back to see them later with someone you trust to help you understand what the options are and what decisions need to be made.

Good to Know: Who you can take to your appointment

You can go and see a GP by yourself or you can take someone with you. This can be anyone you like - a parent, sibling, partner or friend.
GP appointments: how to prepare & what to expect

GP appointments: how to prepare & what to expect gives you a step by step guide about things to consider and what to expect during your appointments with the GP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before your appointment</strong></td>
<td>Before you make an appointment you need to:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “What do I need to do before I make an appointment?” | • Identify your health needs (see Identify your Health Needs)  
• Find a GP if you don’t have one (see How to Find the Right GP)  
• Get a Medicare card (see Medicare & costs)  
• Decide whether to book a standard or long appointment  
• Know the days/times you are available for an appointment  
• Collate all the information you have from your oncologist and/or other health care providers |
| **Making an appointment**                 | To make an appointment you need to call the GP practice or book online (if this is an option). When you book, you will need to give them your name and contact details. It is also good to know that: |
| “How do I make a GP appointment?”         | • No one needs to know the reason you want to see the GP  
• Sometimes there will be appointments available straight away but sometimes you will have to wait a few days  
• It is important to ask whether there will be a cost to see the GP or whether they bulk bill (see Medicare & costs)  
Once you have an appointment date and time it is a good idea to write these details down, including the name of the doctor, so you remember. |
| **On arrival**                             | Every time you go to a GP practice for an appointment you first need to check in at reception to tell them you have arrived (i.e. say “hello my name is Sam and I have an appointment at 10:00am with Dr Matthews”). You then sit in the waiting room and wait for the GP to call your name. |
| **The first appointment with a new GP**   | At the first appointment you will be asked for some information by the reception staff. This may involve: |
| “What is the first thing I will have to do?” | • Filling in a form with your contact details, date of birth and your Medicare card number  
• You may be asked to read and sign a consent form to make sure you understand how the practice will protect your confidentiality and how your health information may be shared with your permission (see Confidentiality). It is important to read this carefully and ask questions about anything you don’t understand before you sign |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“When will I know the GP is ready for me?”</strong></td>
<td>When the GP is ready to see you, they will call your name and take you into a consultation room for the appointment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **“What will they ask me at the first appointment?”** | During the first appointment the GP will ask a lot of questions so that they can get to know you and understand your health and health history. It is important to remember that the GP does this for everyone they see. It is important to be honest so the GP has all the information they need to provide you with quality health care (see Communication & talking to your GP). They may ask questions about:  
  • Physical health – how you are feeling in terms of your body and how your body works, your weight, height and eating habits and any past or current problems, diagnoses, treatments, immunisations, or other investigations (e.g. tests or scans)  
  • Mental health – how you are feeling emotionally, any past or current worries, depression or anxiety, drug or alcohol use  
  • Social health – how you are managing with daily life and your relationships with other people including questions about your family and home, friends and relationships, school/study/work and money or finances  
  • Your health care team – details of other health care providers who are involved in your care  
Once the GP has finished taking your health history they will move on to asking you what your current health concerns or issues are (See My Health Story). |

**Usual appointments**  
**“How will appointments usually work?”**  
**“What are the possible outcomes of an appointment?”**  
Usual appointments involve questions about why you are there to see the GP, discussing any health issues you have and making a plan to best manage these. This may involve:  
• Questions about any symptoms or problems you have with your physical, mental or social health  
• Depending on what your health issues are the GP may need to examine you. This may involve checking your blood pressure, temperature or heart rate, or examining parts of your body that relate to the health issue. Sometimes this can be daunting if you are not used to it. It is important to know that GPs can’t perform any procedure on you without your consent (your permission). You can also ask for someone else to be in the room with you if you like (this may be someone you know or the general practice nurse)  
You and the GP will then discuss and agree on a plan to address your health needs. This may involve the GP:  
• Treating and managing your health concern(s) themselves  
• Referring you for tests, scans or investigations  
• Referring you to other health care professionals or community organisations for care or support  
• Providing you with information  
Depending on the problem and the plan, it may be that only the one appointment is needed, or that follow up appointments are required to monitor your health and progress. If the GP says you need another appointment, or if your health care needs change, it is important to go back to the GP so things can be reviewed and you continue to receive quality care.
Helpful Tips: Be prepared

It is a good idea to write down your health needs or the things you want to address with the GP before the appointment. That way you won’t forget anything.

Helpful Tips: Ask for a letter or health summary from your oncology team

It can be a good idea to ask your oncologist or oncology team to provide you and your GP with a health summary letter, with all diagnostic, treatment and symptom information, as well as details of your treating team and those involved in your care and any upcoming appointments.

Helpful Tips: Managing appointments

GP practices are very busy and sometimes it can take a few days to get an appointment, especially if your GP works part time. Call to make your appointments as soon as you can.

If it is urgent let the reception staff know so they can schedule a time that will meet your needs. The reception staff might ask you some questions so they can find the best appointment time for you. Only provide information that you are comfortable to share with the reception staff.

GPs often have to manage emergency appointments between seeing patients that are booked in. This means they can sometimes be running late. You may need to be calm and if it is taking a while it can be a good idea to talk with the reception staff and ask how long it will be. Another good trick is to try and book one of the first appointments of the day, that way you are less likely to wait around.

Helpful Tips: What to take to your appointment

It is a good idea to take the following things with you to your appointment:

- A list of your health needs (see My Health Story)
- Details of your health care team (see My Health Care Team)
- Your Medicare card (See Medicare & costs)
- Some paper and a pen (or your phone) to make notes about what the GP says and anything you have to find out or do - this can help you to remember
- A support person (if you want to)
- Something to keep you occupied while you wait!
MEDICARE & COSTS

What is Medicare?

Medicare is the Commonwealth Government system that funds a wide range of health services at little or no cost. This includes GP visits, tests and scans and some procedures. Medicare has a schedule or list of costs that it pays for each service. This is called a Medicare rebate. Often the Medicare rebate does not cover the full cost of the health service and the patient is asked to pay the remainder (this is called a ‘gap’ payment).

Medicare cards

When you make a GP appointment, you will be asked for your Medicare card number. It may be that you are already listed on your parent’s Medicare card but, if you are over 15 years old you can get your own Medicare card. You can do this by filling in a form at a local Medicare office. To find out more go to: https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/how-get-your-own-medicare-card-15-years-old/39461

Having your own Medicare card means that your GP visits are linked to your Medicare card and not your parents’ card. If you are not an Australian resident, you may still be eligible for Medicare.

Costs

When you see a GP it can sometimes come with a cost. How much this is depends on how much each GP or practice charges for their time and services. Some GPs only charge the cost that Medicare covers, that is the Medicare rebate amount. This is called bulk billing. This means the full cost of the GP appointment is covered by Medicare and you don’t have to pay any gap. For some health services, the Medicare rebate does not cover the cost of that service and so you can be asked to pay a ‘gap’ fee.

Good to Know: Costs & Medicare rebates

For example, if the GP charges $37.05 for a standard appointment and the Medicare rebate is $37.05, you will not have to pay a gap. If the GP charges $50.00 for a standard appointment and the Medicare rebate is $37.05, you will have a gap of $12.95 to pay.

Paying for your appointment:

If the GP practice bulk bills you will not have to pay anything at the end of the appointment.

If the GP practice does charge a gap fee you will need to pay this at the end of your appointment. It is good to know that many GPs bulk bill younger people and Health Care Card holders.

If you need to pay the full fee for your appointment you can claim the Medicare
rebate back from Medicare. There are a few ways to do this:

• A lot of GP practices now claim directly for you at the time of the appointment. This is called electronic claiming. To do this you will have had to lodge your banking details with Medicare. This can be done online, or at a Medicare office. This means that you pay for the cost of the appointment at the time but the rebate amount goes straight back into your bank account without you having to do anything else.

• If the practice doesn’t claim directly, or you have not provided your bank details to Medicare, you will need to keep a copy of the receipt to claim the rebate straight from Medicare.

• An easy way to action your claim is via the Medicare app or an online myGov account that is linked to Medicare. To start a myGov account go to www.my.gov.au/.

Centrelink & Health Care Cards

If you receive Centrelink benefits (e.g. Newstart Allowance, Sickness Allowance or Mobility Allowance) you will be eligible for a Health Care Card. This means that the costs of some services are reduced and you can access services including bulk billing for GP appointments and cheaper prescriptions.

“Another good thing about having the relationship with my GP is that she does bulkbill me. If I saw another GP I may have to pay the full cost.”

“I agree that cost can be a barrier and the reason I see my GP is because he bulk bills for everything. I don’t think it’s a bulk billing clinic but he does it because he knows how often I am in there.”

Good to Know: myGov

myGov is a secure, online site that you can use to access government services including Medicare, Centrelink and My Health Record. It provides one place to keep track of these services, make claims, update your contact details and receive important information. You can register or find out more at: www.my.gov.au/.
Helpful Tips: Take a photo of your Medicare card & other details

If your phone information is safe and secure, it is a good idea to take a photo of your Medicare and health insurance cards. This way you’ll always have them with you. Just don’t forget to take a photo of the front and the back.

Helpful Tips: Always ask about payment & bulk billing

It is really important to ask the GP practice about the potential costs and payment options when you make an appointment so you are prepared. Each GP and practice is different. It is worth asking your GP if they can bulk bill you.

Good to Know: Your health summary

Your GP will be able to print you off a health summary which can be really useful for your records or if you are planning on travelling or moving.

Helpful Tips: Keeping track of your health

It can be helpful to keep an up to date record or file of all your health and medical information at home. This may include:

- Contacts to call in the event of an emergency
- The contact details for all health care professionals, hospitals and services involved in your care (see My Health Care Team)
- A health summary that includes your current and past health history, current medications, test results and any care plans you have in place (see My Health Story)
MEDICAL RECORDS & YOUR HEALTH INFORMATION

“Feeling like, you know, oh I can actually access my health summary feels empowering, like I have control over my health”

Everyone who sees a GP has their own medical record kept at the GP practice. This contains information about you, your past and present medical history. It includes diagnoses, treatment, investigations and results, each GP appointment and the outcomes and any letters that your GP has sent to, or received from, other health care professionals. It is a legal requirement of the GP to document this information.

This information is usually kept electronically, although some general practices still keep paper files. Because these are kept within the GP practice, other GPs and nurses who are in the practice, and who are authorised to, can also access this information (although it must be kept confidential – see Confidentiality). This helps with the coordination of your care and means that if you need to see a different GP at the same practice, they will be able to access and understand your health history. You have the right to access this information. If you want to do this, discuss with your GP.

Good to Know:
The Australian ‘My Health Record’

The Australian My Health Record is a national, online health record system for documents and information about your health care. You can control the information that your health care team can access. The GP still holds your full medical history but they can upload a current health summary that can be shared with other health care providers. Talk with your GP about how this will benefit your care and if the GP practice is registered to be involved in this national program. You can enrol online or find more information at: www.myhealthrecord.gov.au/.
CONFIDENTIALITY

It is important to know that GPs must keep information about all their patients confidential. This means that they cannot share your information with anyone else unless they have your permission (or the limits of confidentiality are reached*). Confidentiality means you can have confidence that what you tell your GP will remain private. This is important so you can be honest about any health worries and receive the best care. If you want to know more about confidentiality – just ask your GP.

* Health professionals have to share your information with people who can help if they are worried about your safety or the safety of someone else, or if they are required by law to share information. If this is the case they will usually talk to you first about this.

Good to Know:
GP practices & confidentiality

Your medical record is kept within the GP practice and all health professionals in the practice are bound to keep your information confidential. If the GP needs to share your information, they will talk to you first about this.

Real Life Stories

"My GP has always been really good because he sees my parents quite regularly for their own health concerns. When I see him he always asks ‘do your parents know about this? I just want to know so that if they ask I know what I can share and what I can’t’. I’m happy he’s my GP because I know that he’s got that respect, he’s respectful of those boundaries."
Managing your health & working with your GP
HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT GP

“I think you just feel more confident. You cover more space with a GP that has an interest in young people and their issues.”

The key to finding the right GP is to find one that you can be honest with, feel comfortable with and trust. It is best to find a GP that you can build a relationship or rapport with. It also helps to have a regular GP that you see – or at least see GPs in the same general practice. This way you know them and they know you.

Finding the right GP can take some time. A good GP should:

• Be someone you trust
• Be easy to talk to, listen to you and make you feel heard
• Make you feel comfortable asking any questions and sharing honest personal information
• Understand your situation, diagnosis, treatment and health concerns
• Be accessible (i.e. ideally close to home and available for you to see when you need to)
• Have an interest and experience in working with young people and understanding young people’s lives and health concerns (including cancer)

There are many ways to find the right GP including:

• Asking your friends or family for recommendations
• Trying another GP at the practice you go to
• Asking another health care professional you know (this may be a medical specialist, family GP, nurse, physiotherapist, psychologist, social worker or someone else you trust)
• Contact some local GP practices and ask them some questions about their services (see Helpful Tips: Questions to ask a new GP practice)
• Look at the websites of possible GP practices. These often describe the qualifications, experience and areas of interest of each GP
• Schools, TAFEs and universities often have their own GPs and can be a good, convenient place to start
• Most Headspace centres have GPs or can help you to find a GP close to you
• Look online for a health care provider near your area www.healthdirect.gov.au/
Good to Know: Changing GPs

If you don’t feel comfortable with your GP, or find them hard to talk to, it is important to know you can change to another GP. If you do change GPs and move to a new practice, your old practice will transfer a current medical summary to your new GP. If you do change GPs it is important to let your oncology team and other health care professionals know so they can direct information and letters to the right place.

Helpful Tips: Questions to ask a new GP practice

Start these questions with: “Are there GPs at this practice who...”

• Have experience working with young people?
• Have experience working with people with cancer/chronic health/mental health/sexual health concerns (or any other area of need that is important to you)?

• Have an appointment system that means I can get an appointment when I need one?
• Speak the same language as me?
• Would bulk bill my appointment?
• And ask if you can see a male/female GP (depending on preference or who you feel comfortable with)

Real Life Stories

“The last GP I saw wasn’t my regular doctor. I didn’t go in feeling intimidated as such but I did feel like it was more awkward because she didn’t know me, opposed to when you have that relationship with your regular GP and you feel like there’s more care and genuine discussion about what’s happening with your health and life.”

“Last year I had a horrific cold and cough that went on for two whole months and was just not getting any better. I’d been to the GP and he was, like, ‘it’s going around and you’ll be fine’. I went away and it wasn’t getting better and I started to panic so I went back. My dad came with me and I was like, ‘I need you to reassure me that I’m actually okay.’ And I was really pleased because he did – he said ‘I understand why you’re freaking out. But no, you’re ok’. That extra amount of care was really reassuring.”
Talking about your health and knowing how to start the conversation with a GP can be scary. It is important to remember that GPs are trained to help people. It is also important to remember that you are the expert in terms of your body and health.

When talking to your GP about your health, it is important to be honest. This is so the GP can get a true and clear picture of your life and health concerns. There are some tips to communicating well with your GP. These are things that can help:

• Be really clear on what your health needs are (see My Health Story)
• Be prepared when you go to see the GP and know what you want to ask and say. It can help to write this down (see My Health Story & My Health Care Team)
• Remember that you can take someone to support you - and a second pair of ears always helps to understand what is going on and remember what was discussed
• You can take a parent, partner, sibling, relative or friend or you can also ask the general practice nurse to attend with you
• Know that it doesn’t matter how you describe something, as long as you try to tell the GP how you really feel and what your concerns are
• The GP will ask questions to clarify anything they don’t understand
• Know that there is no such thing as a stupid question when it comes to your health (and remember they have usually heard it all before)
• Know that you can ask for clarification if you don’t understand, you can also ask for more information
• Ask for written information so that you can take it away and read later
• Know that you can take your time, you don’t always need to make decisions straight away, you can ask for time to think things over

"It was really hard to know what language to actually use to communicate what I needed, or to know what the GP needed to know about what I was feeling. I just didn’t know how to do it but once I got to know him, he got to know me well enough to pick what I was saying and ask the right questions to get the information he needed. Now it’s much easier."
It is important that you feel comfortable and understand what is happening throughout the GP appointment. If you don’t feel comfortable or aren’t sure what is happening ask more questions. Sometimes it can be helpful to say:

- “I don’t understand what you are saying (or what that word means...). Can you please explain it again”
- “I’m not sure what you are going to do or why. Can you please explain it again”
- “I think I need to come back another time with someone who can help me to understand”
- “Can you write this down for me so I can read over it when I go home”

Good to Know:
You are in charge

If you don’t understand any information that you are given, or feel uncomfortable during your appointment, it is really important to say so. No question is a silly question when it comes to your health - it is your health and you are in control.

Real Life Stories

“I was 22 when I was diagnosed. The last time I’d been to the GP I was in high school. I hadn’t actually had an opportunity as an adult to build rapport with a GP on my own and so that initial appointment with my own GP felt weird. I was like, I don’t really know how to explain what is happening for me. But now, I know what I need to say when I go on my own, how to navigate my way around that relationship, what kind of things they want to know and what they don’t need to know.”
BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND: WHAT YOU CAN DO...

“Feeling in control and empowered is key. That’s why I think clear, transparent conversations are really important.”

It is important to recognise that you are your own best friend and the best expert and advocate in terms of your life and health. To make sure you receive the best care and that you are working towards your best health, there are several things you can do to back yourself including:

• Be clear – really understand what your needs are
• Be honest – about your needs with the GP and other people in your life
• Be reliable – make commitments that are realistic and follow through on things you commit to
• Go to planned appointments with the GP or for investigations and treatment
• If you cannot attend an appointment, let people know and cancel as soon as is possible
• Communicate – with the GP and people around you about any changes to your life, needs or plans and if there are any new problems you are having
• Be your own advocate – know that your life is important and that everyone is different and has different strengths and priorities
• Make sure you understand what happens during your appointments and ask questions to clarify anything that is unclear or you are unsure about

“My GP knows me and it helps to be upfront with her. If I find a lump, I’m straight in there and like ‘you need to send me for a scan’ and she is just like ‘yeah, okay, no worries’. It’s reassuring.”
The last word: take home messages
THE LAST WORD: TAKE HOME MESSAGES

GPs are really important because they are general health specialists. GPs support you to achieve your best health and wellbeing in terms of your body (physical health), mind and emotions (mental health) and interaction with the world and other people (social health).

GPs are especially important if you have had cancer. GPs play many important roles throughout the cancer journey. They can be especially important once cancer treatment ends as they often become the first point of contact for health concerns or questions.

It is important to find a GP that you have a good relationship with and trust. Sharing your personal information honestly will ensure your health needs are met and your health is the best it can be.

It is a good idea to find a GP before you need one. This way they will already know you and you will already know them. You will know how the system works and hopefully feel comfortable asking any question about your health.

Remember that there is no such thing as a silly question. When it comes to your health, it is really important that you understand information, what is going on and have all your questions answered - so don’t be afraid to speak up and ask away.

Be your own best friend & trust yourself. It is important to remember that it is your health and your life and that you are in control. You are also the expert in terms of your health. Your GP and health care team are there to support you, so back yourself.

- you’ve got this!

Your health is really important.

Making sure that your health is the best it can be is essential to ensure you live the best life you can.
## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & USEFUL LINKS

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| **Health Direct**                            | A Commonwealth funded website that provides a ‘symptom checker’ and the ability to search for health care providers in your area.  
www.healthdirect.gov.au                        |
| **ONTrac at Peter Mac Victorian Adolescent & Young Adult Cancer Service** | A multidisciplinary specialist team of healthcare professionals providing care and support to young people and families including medical support, nursing, psychology, social work, education and vocation support and other specialty care.  
03 8559 6880  
| **Youth Cancer Services**                    | Youth Cancer Services (YCS) are specialised treatment and support services for young people with cancer. Based in major hospitals throughout Australia, they are designed to meet the unique treatment, care and support needs of young people with cancer.  
www.canteen.org.au/youth-cancer/find-ycs        |
| **CanTeen**                                  | An Australian national support organisation for young people living with cancer; including cancer patients, their brothers and sisters and young people with parents or primary carers with cancer.  
1800 226 833 / www.canteen.org.au               |
| **Headspace**                                | The national youth mental health foundation providing early intervention mental health services to 12-25 year olds, along with assistance in promoting young peoples’ wellbeing.  
www.headspace.org.au                            |
| **Livewire**                                 | An online community of support for young people aged 10-20 years living with chronic illness or disability.  
www.livewire.org.au                             |
| **Lifeline**                                 | A national charity for all Australians experiencing personal crisis. 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.  
13 11 14 / www.lifeline.org.au                  |
| **Beyond Blue**                              | Provides mental health information and support.  
1300 22 46 36 / www.beyondblue.org.au            |
| **Redkite**                                  | An Australian cancer charity that supports children and young people with cancer (0–24 years) and their families.  
www.redkite.org.au                               |
| **myGov**                                    | A secure, online way of accessing government services including Medicare, Centrelink and My Health Record among others. It provides one place to keep track of these services, make claims, update your contact details and receive important information.  
www.my.gov.au                                    |
| **Medicare**                                 | Medicare is the Commonwealth Government system that funds a wide range of health services at little or no cost.  
www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/medicare    |
| **Medicare App**                             | You can use this app to access your Medicare information and complete a range of services using your mobile device.  
Before downloading the Express Plus Medicare mobile app, you need a myGov account.  
www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/services/medicare/express-plus-medicare-mobile-app#a1  |
Notes


Royal Children’s Hospital (2015). All you Need to Know about General Practitioners (GPs). Melbourne: Royal Children’s Hospital.


