

VitalTalk Principles for Outpatient Oncology During COVID-19

Target Audience: Medical or Radiation Oncology Clinicians

Purpose: To provide practical advice on how to talk to cancer patients about difficult topics related to cancer care during the COVID-19 pandemic. These communication tips offer strategies for responding to questions about cancer treatment timing in the time of COVID-19. We also suggest clinicians see the VitalTalk resources regarding advance care planning, which continues to be important for cancer patients.

Here we present common scenarios affecting oncology health care professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scenario 1: A COVID-19 negative cancer patient who is worried about coming into the hospital for radiation or chemo and is delaying timely care.

What they say	What you say
I'm worried about the virus. I don't want to take any chances of getting infected.	It is normal to be concerned. Tell me more about what's worrying you.
I'm afraid I'm going to get sick if I come in for treatment.	I'm concerned about that too. Your safety is extremely important to us. I'm also worried that without treatment, your cancer might grow. This is a tough situation.
But they told everyone last week to stay home so we don't get sick, and now it is safe? I don't get it.	It's a tough situation. The world is changing so rapidly. Based on everything we know right now, we believe it's safe for you to come in to get your treatments. We have worked carefully in our clinic to ensure that you stay as safe as possible.
I'm not sure what to do, I know I need treatment for my cancer but I'm scared.	I hear you. This is scary. Would it be ok if I share with you what we are telling others in a similar situation? Based on what we know about your cancer, we think that it is important that you start treatment now. I am worried that your cancer will grow if we wait. <i>Modified treatment to minimize risk:</i> We are balancing the risk of COVID-19 and the risk of your cancer. We would like to give you a shorter treatment now to keep your cancer under control. This will help us keep you as safe as possible from the virus by minimizing the number of visits you will need to make to the cancer center.

	<p>This is a tough situation.</p> <p>What do you think about what I said?</p>
I just don't think I can do it.	I can only imagine how hard this is. What can we do to help you cope with all of the things you are going through?

Scenario 2: A cancer patient whose treatment is interrupted due to COVID-19.

What they say	What you say
I'm concerned my cancer will grow if I don't start/finish getting treated right now.	<p>This is a tough situation. I know you want the best possible care.</p> <p>We are doing everything we can to provide you the best care possible during this difficult time.</p> <p>Because of how bad the COVID-19 situation is in our area, our cancer center is postponing many people's treatments.</p> <p>I wish things were different.</p>
But I have cancer, why would you not treat it?	This is an extraordinary time. I wish things were different.
I don't care, I just want to get my treatment.	<p>I hear you. This is such a tough situation.</p> <p>Because of COVID-19, we aren't able to safely give cancer treatments to anyone right now.</p> <p>It is common to sometimes pause treatment for short periods of time for any number of reasons. I hope this won't make your treatment any less effective.</p> <p>I wish this was different.</p>
Won't I die from my cancer if we wait?	<p>I can only imagine how difficult it is to wait under these circumstances.</p> <p>I wish things were different.</p>
[mistrust] I feel like you aren't telling me everything about why I can't get my treatment.	<p>I want you to know that your trust is important to me. The situation is changing daily and I am doing my best to keep you updated.</p> <p>Can you share with me what your most important concerns are?</p>
Aren't you just discriminating because I am ...	<p>This is an extraordinary time.</p> <p>We are using the same guidelines for everyone. No one is being singled out or treated differently.</p> <p>It's hard to wait.</p>
This is unacceptable!	The world is a really unacceptable place to many of us right now. I am here to support you and do what is in my power to improve

	<p>things for you.</p> <p>What could I do that would help?</p>
<p>[if COVID-19 positive] Now that I have the virus, what does that mean for my cancer treatment?</p>	<p>Use SHARE :</p> <p><i>Share your institution’s current guidelines:</i> I see you are worried; it is a hard situation. Right now, we need to stop your treatment given the cancer center rules.</p> <p><i>Headline what it means for the patient:</i> For you, this means that we will need to pause your treatment until COVID-19 gets better.</p> <p><i>Affirm the care you will provide:</i> We will be doing everything we can to provide you the best care possible during this difficult time [and we will re-start your treatment as soon as it is safe to do so].</p> <p><i>Respond to emotion:</i> This is a frustrating situation. I wish things were different.</p> <p><i>Emphasize the same rules apply to everyone:</i> This is an extraordinary time and we are applying these same guidelines to all of our patients. No one is being singled out.</p>
<p>[if COVID-19 positive] Will I die from coronavirus?</p>	<p>I can only imagine how scary it must be to think about this.</p> <p>It is too soon to say for certain how the coronavirus will impact you. While cancer puts you at a higher risk of a severe infection, many people get a milder illness and get better.</p> <p>We will do our best to support you and your family through this illness.</p> <p>Let’s talk about what you should look for that will help us take the best care of you over the next few weeks. {plan for future}</p>

Scenario 3: Advance care planning in anticipation of COVID-19.

We encourage oncology health care professionals to discuss advance care planning with patients during the pandemic, in order to help plan for the future if a patient were to become seriously ill with COVID-19. Several talking maps that facilitate advance care planning during COVID-19 are available from VitalTalk at <https://www.vitaltalk.org/topics/covid-collaborative-resources/> and the Center to Advance Palliative Care (<https://www.capc.org/toolkits/covid-19-response-resources/>).