How do you prepare your body for chemotherapy? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a friend who will be going through chemotherapy and radiation. What can she do to build herself up to keep her body in the best condition possible?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Chemotherapy and radiation — using drugs and radiation to kill cancer cells — can be tough on both the body and the mind. As you suggest, advance preparation can make the process easier. While it is unclear how much time your friend has before she begins her treatment, the following suggestions may offer some sense of direction in preparing for therapy.

Eat well.

In order to keep the body working at its best to prepare for treatment, nutrition is important. Typically, a healthy eating plan includes lots of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and moderate amounts of low-fat meats and dairy products. The nutritional needs of people with cancer, including those who are preparing for chemotherapy or radiation, however, may require high-calorie, high-protein foods, such as milk, cream, cheese, and cooked eggs. Other recommendations may include cooking with more sauces, gravies, butter, margarine, or oil. While the emotional stress of cancer and beginning treatment can affect appetite, these extra nutrients may help to ensure that people with cancer will be able to commence treatment with the energy reserves needed. Your friend needs to consult with her cancer treatment team, which may include a nutritionist, before her sessions begin for specific recommendations tailored to her cancer and the chemotherapy and radiation treatments she will be given. (During treatment, these calorie- and protein-rich food recommendations may change.)

Reduce or better manage stress.

Dealing with cancer's diagnosis and treatment always causes additional stress, and even crisis. For a lot of people, getting as much information as possible about their specific cancer and the recommended treatments, helps alleviate some of this stress. As your friend learns about her recommended treatment and the procedures associated with it, she will have a much better understanding of what lies ahead. In addition to the information she will be receiving from her cancer treatment team, finding a support group through an organization such as Cancer Care [2] may help her prepare. Also, talking with others in a similar position, or
with those who have gone through this, can provide valuable insight. The American Cancer Society home page [3] is another resource to explore. Learning and practicing stress reduction techniques can help before and during treatment? your friend can look at the stress and anxiety section of the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health archives for tips on how to get started.

Get enough rest.

Your friend also needs to get good sleep. A well-rested person is more able to deal with the stress of cancer diagnosis and treatment. If your friend is having trouble sleeping or relieving stress, or just wants someone to talk with about her treatment, an appointment with a counselor might be helpful.

To find out more about preparing for cancer treatment, you and your friend can visit the American Cancer Society’s site on What to Do Before Treatment Begins [4]. Also, consider a visit to the American Academy of Family Physicians’ Cancer: Preparing for Treatment webpage for more ways to make the time and experience during treatment easier. If you or your friend prefers books, pick up The Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy Survival Guide by Judith McKay and Nancee Hirano.

It's great that you're being so supportive before your friend's treatment? she's lucky to have a friend like you!

Alice!
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