

WHEN CANCER TREATMENT DOES NOT WORK

Understanding What May Happen Next

When a treatment does not work, the news can feel like the ground has shifted again.

It is natural to hear “progression” or “no response” and immediately fear that every option has disappeared. Sometimes the plan does change quickly. But treatment not working does not always mean there is no next step.

WHAT YOUR TEAM MAY DO NEXT

Your oncology team may need time before recommending another treatment. Depending on your situation, the next review may include:

- reviewing scans again
- reconsidering pathology
- looking again at biomarkers
- discussing the case at a multidisciplinary meeting
- asking whether the cancer may have changed
- considering whether another biopsy or molecular testing would be useful
- seeking another specialist opinion

The review may help the team confirm what the result means, whether more information is needed and which options, if any, are realistic.

WHY TREATMENT PLANS CHANGE

Cancer does not always follow the pattern clinicians expect. A treatment chosen for good reasons may still fail to control it.

That does not mean the original decision was careless or pointless. The result may give the team information that affects what they consider next.

THE NEXT STEP MAY LOOK DIFFERENT

Sometimes the next step is another cancer-directed treatment, further testing, a clinical trial or another specialist opinion. Sometimes the focus shifts towards controlling symptoms, protecting comfort and quality of life, or palliative care alongside other treatment.

Palliative care is not the same as giving up. It can be offered at different stages to help with symptoms, practical concerns and quality of life. What is appropriate depends on your situation and goals.

Your oncology team should explain which options are realistic for you and what each one is intended to achieve.

QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

- What exactly did the scan or test show?
- Did the treatment have any effect at all?
- Does this result change what you think about the cancer?
- Will my case be reviewed again by the wider team?
- Are further tests, another biopsy or molecular profiling relevant?
- What are the realistic options now?
- What is the goal of the next treatment?
- How quickly do we need to decide?
- Is there anything I should do while waiting for the next plan?

THE WORK YOU MAY NOT SEE

Patients often leave an appointment wondering whether anything is happening in the space before the next one.

Different teams work in different ways. Reviews may involve colleagues, new evidence or another specialist opinion.

If you are unsure what is happening between appointments, ask who is reviewing your case, what is still pending and when you should expect the next update.

HONESTY AND HOPE CAN EXIST TOGETHER

Hope after disappointing news does not require pretending everything is fine.

Sometimes it means asking a different question: not only “How do we make this go away?” but “What remains possible, and what matters most to me now?”

The next path may not be the one anyone wanted at the beginning.

It can still be a path, and you deserve a clear, honest explanation of where it may lead.

This resource is for general support and preparation. It does not replace advice from your oncology team. Treatment decisions depend on the cancer type, test results, previous treatments, overall health and your own goals.