

HOME HEALTH CARE

Cancer patients often feel more comfortable and secure being cared for at home. Many patients want to stay at home so that they will not be separated from family, friends, and familiar surroundings. Home care can help patients achieve this desire. It often involves a team approach that includes doctors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, family members, and others. Home care can be both rewarding and demanding for patients and caregivers. It can change relationships and require families to address new issues and cope with all aspects of patient care. To help prepare for these changes, patients and caregivers are encouraged to ask questions and get as much information as possible from the home care team or organizations devoted to home care. A doctor, nurse, or social worker can provide information about a patient's specific needs, the availability of home care services, and a list of local home care agencies.

SERVICES PROVIDED

Services provided by home care agencies may include access to medical equipment; visits from registered nurses, physical therapists, and social workers; help with running errands, meal preparation, and personal hygiene; and delivery of medication. The state or local health department is another important resource in finding home care services. The health department should have a registry of licensed home care agencies.

QUALIFYING FOR AND PAYING FOR HOME HEALTH CARE

Financial assistance to help patients pay for home care is available from public and private sources. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and some government-sponsored programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act, cover home care for those who meet their criteria.

Some people may qualify for Medicare, a health insurance program for the elderly or disabled that is administered by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). Medicare may offer reimbursement for some home care services. Cancer patients who qualify for Medicare may also be eligible for coverage of hospice services if they are accepted into a Medicare-certified hospice program. Information about Medicare services and coverage is available from the toll-free Medicare hotline at 1-800-633-4227 (1-800-MEDICARE), or by writing to 7500 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21244-1850. Deaf and hard of hearing callers with TTY equipment may call 1-877-486-2048. Medicare information can also be accessed at www.medicare.gov on the Internet.

Medicaid, a jointly funded, Federal-state health insurance program for people who need financial assistance for medical expenses, is also

coordinated by CMS. At a minimum, states must provide home care services to people who receive Federal income assistance such as Social Security Income and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Medicaid coverage includes part-time nursing, home care aide services, and medical supplies and equipment. Information about coverage is available from local state welfare offices, state health departments, state social services agencies, or the state Medicaid office. The phone number for the state Medicaid office can be found in the blue pages of Government listings in the phone book, under the state health department heading. A list of the CMS Regional Offices is available on the CMS Web site www.cms.hhs.gov/RegionalOffices/ on the Internet. Staff in the Regional Offices can also provide program and contact information for state Medicaid offices.

The Older Americans Act provides Federal funds for state and local social service programs that help frail and disabled people age 60 and older remain independent. This funding covers home care aide, personal care, meal delivery, and escort and shopping services. Older persons, their caregivers, or anyone concerned about the welfare of an older person can contact their local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) for information and referrals to services and benefits in the community. The AAAs are usually listed in the white pages of the phone book under the city or county government headings. A nationwide toll-free hotline operated by the U.S. Administration on Aging, the Eldercare Locator, provides information about AAAs and other assistance for older people. The Eldercare Locator can be reached by phone at 1-800-677-1116, or at www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare/Public/Home.asp on the Internet.

Veterans who are disabled as a result of military service can receive home care services from the VA. Only home care services provided by VA hospitals may be used. More information about veterans benefits is available by calling 1-877-222-8387 (1-877-222-VETS). Information can also be found on the VA's Web site www1.va.gov/health/ on the Internet. For more information about the VA's home- and community-based long-term care programs, you may wish to view the fact sheet VA Long-Term Care at www1.va.gov/opa/fact/docs/lcicare.doc on the Internet.

Private health insurance policies may cover some home care or hospice services, but benefits vary from plan to plan. Policies generally pay for services given by skilled professionals, but the patient may be responsible for a deductible or co-payment. Many health maintenance organizations require that home care or hospice services be given by authorized agencies. It is best to contact the insurance company to see which services are covered.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND INFORMATION TO ASSIST IN DECISION-MAKING

Many national organizations, such as the American Cancer Society (ACS), offer a variety of services to cancer patients and their families. Services vary among ACS chapters; however, many of the chapters can provide home care equipment (or suggest other organizations that do). The ACS can be reached

by phone at 1-800-227-2345 (1-800-ACS-2345), or www.cancer.org on the Internet. For callers with TTY equipment, the number is 1-866-228-4327. The ACS also has free fact sheets and materials about home care. The publication *Caring for the Patient With Cancer at Home: A Guide for Patients and Families* can be viewed online and is available in hard copy by calling the ACS. Other voluntary agencies, such as the Red Cross and those affiliated with churches or social service organizations, may provide free or low-cost transportation. These agencies may also be able to lend home care equipment.

With so many home care organizations and services available, it is sometimes difficult to decide which to use. In addition to the local health department, information about home care services is available from organizations such as the National Association for Home Care & Hospice (NAHC). The publication *How To Choose a Home Care Provider: A Consumer's Guide* can be obtained by contacting the NAHC at 228 Seventh Street, SE., Washington, DC 20003. The telephone number is 202-547-7424. The booklet can also be ordered on the NAHC's Web site, which is located www.nahc.org on the Internet. An affiliate of the NAHC, the Hospice Association of America, offers publications such as *Information About Hospice: A Consumer's Guide*. For a copy of this publication, send a self-addressed, stamped, business envelope to the NAHC address mentioned above.

The Joint Commission, an independent, not-for-profit organization that evaluates and accredits health care organizations and programs in the United States, also offers information for the general public. The Joint Commission can be contacted at One Renaissance Boulevard, Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181-4294; their telephone number is 630-792-5000. The Joint Commission Web site is located www.jointcommission.org on the Internet.

Work cited:

National Cancer Institute Fact Sheet 8.5 Home Care for Cancer Patients (www.cancer.gov)