

## Using 'Watchful Waiting' for Bladder Cancer Diagnosis

Getting a diagnosis of bladder cancer does not always mean having to have surgery, chemotherapy or radiation. Bladder cancers are sometimes treated with 'watchful waiting.' Watchful waiting involves closely watching a patient's condition but not giving treatment unless symptoms appear or change, according to the National Cancer Institute. Patients may be given tests and exams during watchful waiting.<sup>1</sup>

Giving tests and exams, but not treatment allows the doctor to get a clearer picture of risks of treatments) to the patient and whether or not the cancer is growing and how quickly it is growing. This allows patients and physicians to make better decisions about how urgently treatment is needed. Watchful waiting allows patients to avoid or delay adverse effects of treatment (such as infection, pain, discomfort after surgery) that may affect their quality of life.

For some older patients or patients who have other health problems, the risks treatments may be greater than waiting to treat. Physicians may want to employ the watch and wait strategy in these cases. For other patients, costs of treating the bladder cancer can also affect quality of life. Waiting may also be seen as the less risky option in cases where patients must pay more for medical care than they can afford.<sup>2</sup>

## Cancer Stage and Grade: Key Factors in Deciding Treatment Approach

According to the American Cancer society, most of the time, initial treatment of bladder cancer is based on the clinical stage (or extent) of the tumor, which is how deep it is thought to have grown into the bladder wall and whether it has spread beyond the bladder. The stage is one of the most important factors in deciding how to treat the cancer and determining how successful treatment might be.

Doctors will determine the stage or extent of cancer in the body through physical exams, biopsies, and imaging tests (CT or MRI scan, x-rays, PET scan, etc.). Doctors need to know whether the cancer has grown into the wall of the bladder, reached nearby structures, or spread to nearby lymph nodes or to distant organs to determine the stage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms. National Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/watchful-waiting>. Accessed July 27, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Casilla-Lennon MM, Choi SK, Deal AM, et al. Bladder cancer in the elderly patient: challenges and solutions. J Urol. 2018 May;199(5):1166-1173. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26089655>. Accessed July 27, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Bladder Cancer Stages. American Cancer Society. 2017. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging.html> Accessed July 27, 2018.

“Low grade” bladder cancers are slow growing cancers that hardly ever progress and are usually treated via the watchful waiting approach.<sup>4</sup> This risk of using ‘watchful waiting’ for these types of cancers is accepted as low.

## Asking Questions About Watchful Waiting

If you have been diagnosed with bladder cancer and your doctor is recommending a watchful waiting approach, it is important that you understand the risks and benefits of waiting to treat versus treating. Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be stressful and emotional. This can make decision making challenging. Some patients may find waiting to treat anxiety provoking. Most patients can reduce their anxiety by learning more about their cancer and the treatment they can expect to receive.

Establishing good communication with your doctor so that you understand the risks and benefits of waiting versus treating is key to ensuring you get the treatment that best suits your needs.

Some things to consider if your doctor is recommending a ‘watchful wait” approach to your diagnosis...

- Make sure you understand what type of bladder cancer you have. There are many stages and grades of cancer.
- Know whether or not your cancer has spread beyond the bladder, this is key in determining monitoring and treatment plans.
- Discuss all of your treatment options including their goals and possible side effects. Ask your doctor if you need any other tests to decide on a watchful waiting approach.
- Consider your age, lifespan, and any other health conditions that you have and how those factors may affect your quality of life.
- Consider a second opinion to help you feel confident in a treatment approach and ensuring you understand your condition.<sup>5</sup>
- What are the costs associated with each treatment being suggested?

Consider getting an oncology social worker to help you sort through the process and information. They help patients and their families deal with the experience of facing cancer.

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<sup>4</sup> Makito M, Kiyohide F, and Yoshihiko H. Active surveillance for nonmuscle invasive bladder cancer. *Investig Clin Urol.* 2016 Jun; 57(Suppl 1): S4–S13. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4910757/> Accessed July 30, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Treating Bladder Cancer. American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer/treating.html>. Accessed July 30, 2018.

