

When Should You Get A Second Medical Opinion?

by **Barbara Stahura**

There are often situations when a second doctor's opinion can significantly change the plan of treatment and quality of life, but many smart women fail to obtain a second opinion.



Some are sure they already have the "best" doctor; others fear they could damage their relationship with a trusted long-time physician. There are also women who don't realize that their insurance will cover the cost of a second opinion. Traditional Medicare will even pay for a third opinion when the first two physicians disagree. Medicare Advantage and all commercial insurance plans also pay for a second opinion, as long as the consultant is in-network and a PCP referral is obtained.

Before starting treatment for any illness where a surgical procedure or a medication with significant side effects was recommended, I would go for a second opinion. Chronic joint pain, severe heart disease, cancer, or a rare disease are just some of the conditions where it is important to consider all possible options for care.

Research has found that between 10% and 40% of second opinion consultations



result in a different plan of care. When the second MD's proposed treatment plan is different it could be based on their knowledge of more up to date medical protocols, or simply reflect a more aggressive vs conservative treatment approach. Knowing the pros and cons of all possible options enables the patient to make a decision that best suits her overall state of health and lifestyle.

When arranging for a second opinion, the new physician ideally should be affiliated with a different hospital/medical school, to avoid the possibility that a consulting MD would hesitate to disagree with their colleague's plan of care. All medical records, imaging, biopsies and reports should be made available to the consultant. The second opinion MD should be requested to confirm the accuracy of the diagnosis, and present options for treatment.

The patient should be prepared to ask the consultant questions that will help to decide what treatment is best for her, and when and where to obtain the care. Sometimes a second opinion consultant is asked to become the treating physician, but more often a patient returns to their original MD, with increased confidence in her original doctor's treatment recommendation.