

Issues to Consider When Choosing a Treatment Center

Many brain tumor patients and their family members contact the National Brain Tumor Society with questions about how to choose a doctor and medical team. Here is a list of important issues to consider when choosing who will provide care for you or your loved one.

How many brain tumor patients does the medical center diagnose and/or treat per year?

What types of brain tumors?

Many hospitals offer excellent care for patients diagnosed with a brain tumor. However, some medical centers are simply not equipped to handle the magnitude of a brain tumor diagnosis. While size alone does not indicate a treatment center's quality, it is generally accepted that high-volume centers tend to provide better care.

It can be particularly important to seek out a specialized brain tumor center or clinic if one has a rare or malignant tumor requiring complicated treatment. Also note that some institutions specialize in treating children, while others specialize in treating adults.

How many second opinions does the treatment center give per year?

A second opinion is an important tool for evaluation. It may offer insight about other options that are available and ultimately allows one to make a more informed decision regarding a treatment plan.

A second opinion can often be obtained by electronically sending or mailing your scans and various reports to a doctor. Ask about a treatment center's procedure and fees for giving a second opinion.

Which of the following specialists are included on the treatment team?

A multi-disciplinary treatment team, made up of various specialists, is generally considered the preferred approach; although, with smaller institutions this may not be possible.

- **Neuro-oncologist:** Oncologist (cancer doctor) specializing in the treatment of cancers and tumors affecting the brain, the spinal cord, and the nervous system.
- **Neuro-oncology Nurse Specialist:** Licensed nurse specializing in patient education and support services for brain tumor patients; often available for consultation on symptom management.
- **Neurologist:** Doctor specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders and diseases affecting the brain, the spinal cord, and the nervous system.
- **Neurosurgeon:** Surgeon specializing in the diagnosis, treatment, and surgical management of disorders and diseases of the brain, spinal cord, and nervous system.
- **Neuroradiologist:** Radiologist who specializes in the interpretation of diagnostic images—such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)—of the brain, spinal cord, and nervous system. A neuroradiologist may also administer radiation therapy.
- **Radiation Oncologist:** Doctor specializing in the administration of radiation therapy.
- **Neuropathologist:** Doctor specializing in the diagnosis of neurological disorders and diseases through microscopic examination of biopsied tissues (cells from the tumor).
- **Neuropsychologist:** Licensed psychologist specializing in how the brain functions and the impact that damage to the brain has on one's abilities.

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Does the medical center have a brain tumor board or other formal mechanism for interdisciplinary consultation?

A tumor board is a regular meeting of specialists from the treatment team who come together to discuss patients and their brain tumors. Tumor boards include specialists from multiple disciplines, such as neurosurgeons, neurologists, and radiation oncologists. The tumor board meets and reviews the patient's MRI films and clinical and pathological information, then discusses treatment options and makes a group recommendation regarding treatment.

What types of imaging technologies does the center have available?

When it comes to diagnostic imaging, it is important to have the best scan possible. A computerized tomography (CT) scan is often not sufficient, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is generally the preferred method.

- **Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI):** Three-dimensional imaging technique used to identify and monitor brain tumors. This technique uses magnetic fields to provide very clear images and allows for the exact localization of tumors and visualization of small lesions that may not appear on CT scans. An intraoperative MRI is a surgical tool that allows for MRI images to be taken during surgery. Intraoperative MRI technology is not available at all treatment centers.
- **Positron Emission Tomography (PET):** Test to measure cellular activity. An injection of radioactive glucose dye is given to the patient and then a scan is made. Since malignant tumor cells metabolize glucose more quickly than healthy cells, tumor cells also take up more of the radioactive marker. These "hot spots" of high glucose metabolism then appear on the scan. This technique can be especially useful in distinguishing dead tissue masses from active tumor cells.

Does the center participate in clinical trials?

What types of trials? How many?

A clinical trial is experimental research that involves treatment for brain tumors. In addition to being an avenue for providing high quality health care, clinical trials aim to answer questions about the effectiveness of promising new treatments. Clinical trials may be sponsored by an institution (such as a hospital), by a pharmaceutical company, by the

National Cancer Institute or by a national cooperative group in which multiple treatment centers collaborate to conduct the trial. An institution which participates in clinical trials may reflect that institution's commitment to brain tumor research and may provide more treatment options.

What sort of rehabilitation services does the center offer?

Every person with a brain tumor deserves to function optimally, and many brain tumor patients benefit from rehabilitation services. It is important that patients be evaluated for the appropriate rehabilitation and treatment. Some rehabilitative services include:

- **Physical Therapy:** Helps patients develop, maintain, and restore maximum movement and functional ability.
- **Speech Therapy:** Helps improve speech, swallowing, language, and communication.
- **Occupational Therapy:** Teaches patients how to manage side effects so that they can better perform activities in their daily lives.
- **Neuropsychology:** Evaluates changes caused by the tumor/treatment and can make recommendations to help the patient regain as much function as possible; may offer training in compensation techniques.

What kind of practical, emotional, and social support services are available?

Support services are an important complement to medical care. Examples of support resources include social workers, chaplains, housing assistance (i.e., places to stay while receiving medical care far from home), caregiver assistance programs, and support groups (whether general cancer or brain tumor-specific). Some services may be available on an outpatient basis, such as educational sessions, informational literature, or a local information referral network.

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About National Brain Tumor Society

Today there are over 600,000 people in the US living with the devastating diagnosis of a brain tumor and NBTS is fiercely committed to finding a cure for all of them. Learn more about our targeted adult and pediatric brain tumor research programs, and our latest advocacy efforts at www.braintumor.org.