When dealing with a complex medical condition, the diagnosis, treatment and management can be complicated, and making decisions about your health care is important. Getting a second opinion can help you feel more confident about your diagnosis and treatment plan.

There are many reasons why you want to seek another opinion during the course of your care. Maybe you don’t feel confident in your doctor’s ability to treat your condition, or you have a rare or unusual condition. Or your condition isn’t responding to the current treatment.

According to Mayo Clinic patient educators, taking the time to learn about your condition, and getting a second or third opinion is a reasonable approach. Proactive decision-making will give you a greater degree of control over your treatment. Make decisions regarding your health after you have been thoroughly informed about your diagnosis, prognosis and available treatment options.

Tips on getting a second opinion

“Getting a second opinion means having the added benefit of another expert weighing in on your situation with his or her knowledge and expertise,” says Lonnie Fynskov, a nurse educator for the Cancer Education Program at Mayo Clinic. “He or she may be familiar with additional diagnostic tools and treatment options. Hopefully, that will increase your confidence on how best to proceed with your care. You may be nervous about telling your current doctor you are interested in seeking a second opinion. Even though this is your choice and doesn’t need an explanation, it may be helpful to outline what you need to feel confident in your next steps and why talking to another doctor is important to you. Many times, your current doctor will be happy to recommend someone. If you are unsure what to do next in your treatment, you should be recommending a second opinion automatically.”

You also can seek out a second opinion on your own. This is your choice, so don’t feel bad about looking for additional support in feeling confident about your care.
Follow these tips from Mayo Clinic’s article, “Tips for Seeking Second Opinions With Cancer Care,” when seeking a second opinion:

- If you don’t have a provider recommendation, look for providers who specialize in your condition and have experience delivering care. Check to see that they deliver high-quality care and outcomes, and have research programs that support development of new treatments. Recommendations of friends and family members, or former patients can be helpful, as well.

- Check with your insurance provider to determine coverage, especially if the visit is out of your network. Also, check to see that the new specialist accepts your insurance type.

- When you call to schedule the appointment, find out if the facility has a specialist with experience treating your condition.

- Plan to bring your medical records, including copies of all scans, exams, previous treatment, blood tests and pathology slides, with you to the appointment.

- Be clear what you’re looking for from the second opinion. Do you need confirmation that your current treatment recommendation is correct for you? Or are you looking for other options? Are you interested in clinical trials?

- As you work with the new specialist, explain why you’re seeking a second opinion, and communicate your primary needs for the visit.

- Consider your plan for next steps. Do you need to transfer your care to receive the new treatment options? Or can the treatment plan be communicated to your original doctor for care?

**Why get a second opinion? Doctor's opinions may differ**

Doctors may have different diagnoses or offer different treatment options based on their background. Doctors might have varied experience when it comes to treating your disease, working with technology and approaches based on training and experience.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, getting a second opinion from a different doctor might give you a fresh perspective and new information. It could provide you with new options for treating your condition. Some doctors take a more conservative, or traditional, approach to treating their patients. Other doctors are more aggressive and use the newest tests and therapies.

According to the Patient Advocate Foundation, statistics show that more than one-third of adults in the U.S. never will seek a second opinion, and almost one-tenth of newly diagnosed patients rarely or never understand their diagnoses. A second opinion means you are consulting with another doctor to confirm a diagnosis and/or find possible different treatment choices available to you.
A second opinion can give you extra confidence that you’re doing the best thing. However, if you choose to transfer your care to another doctor, make sure that you communicate this to your original doctor.

“Dealing with a serious condition can be very stressful, so it’s important to have confidence in your treatment options and providers. No one wants to second guess themselves later on,” says Fynskov. “If you feel the need for extra clarity and assurance, don’t be afraid to ask for a second opinion. Your peace of mind will definitely make it worthwhile.”

The decisions about your health care are likely some of the most important decisions in your life. Taking the time to understand and consider all options and approaches is important and part of being your own health advocate.