



# Making the right choice: Understanding the differences between standard treatment and clinical trials

**7**he decision to participate in a clinical trial is a deeply personal one. What's right for one person may not be right for another. Before making this important decision, it's crucial to understand the difference between standard medical treatment and care during a clinical trial.

When you receive treatment as a clinical trial volunteer, it's not the same as receiving standard medical treatment as a patient. In standard medical treatment, your doctor's only goal is to help you get better. To try to make that happen, she'll assess your condition, discuss treatment options with you, and recommend the treatment she thinks best meets your needs. In some cases, there may be a variety of treatment options for your condition, including medications and surgical procedures. Your doctor will discuss the pros and cons of those choices with you. During the course of your treatment, your doctor might alter your treatment to try and achieve better results or to alleviate any side effects you might be experiencing. For example, she might adjust the dosage of your medication or try a different prescription.

In a clinical trial, the researcher's goal is to find out how a drug or device works in your body. The trial is about collecting research data while making sure all volunteers are treated safely and fairly. The range of treatment options is limited by the trial's research design or "protocol." That means you only have access to what's allowed by the protocol.

There are medical benefits to participating in a clinical trial. Volunteers have access to new treatments, which may be more effective than standard therapies and may not be available elsewhere. Participants receive regular and careful medical attention from a research team that includes doctors and other health professionals, and they may be the first to benefit from the treatment being studied.

But participating in a clinical trial involves medical risks as well. You may experience unpleasant or even dangerous side effects. The drug or procedure being studied may not work as well as standard treatments, or you may be given a placebo or "dummy drug" instead of an active medication. This is important to consider if you are planning to stop your regular medical therapy in order to participate in a trial, since the study treatment may or may not be as effective.

Before consenting to participate in a trial, ask the researcher to compare the risks and benefits of the standard treatment to the potential risks and benefits of the trial and talk to your doctor about standard care so you can make an informed choice.

If you choose to participate in a trial, chances are you'll have questions along the way. Continue to ask questions of the trial staff and keep your own physician in the loop. Remember that when you sign up for a trial you do so with the understanding that you will be well treated. It's part of your responsibility as a volunteer to make sure that happens.

