

Confused About Cancer?

1.800.4.CANCER Is Here to Help

The taxpayer-supported National Cancer Institute contact center is based at Fred Hutch Cancer Center. It also includes a Smoking Quitline.

April 22, 2026 By Fred Hutch News Service and Bonnie Rochman

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, the learning curve required to get up to speed can be dauntingly steep. What are the best treatment options? Which providers are specialists in a patient's specific disease? What clinical trials are available?

Clinical trials, for example, are often the best option for receiving innovative treatments that are still in the experimental stage. Finding those clinical trials, which are housed at academic medical centers throughout the country, can be difficult and time-consuming. But a powerhouse resource, the [Cancer Information Service \(CIS\)](#), is here to help — literally.

Based at Fred Hutch Cancer Center, the taxpayer-funded CIS serves as the bridge between the [National Cancer Institute](#) and the public. Its primary goal is to disseminate accurate information about cancer, connecting people with research and information about cancer, including treatment, prevention, screening and clinical trials being conducted by NCI. The majority of cancer clinical trials in the United States are associated with NCI.

CIS provides free and confidential phone, live chat and email support in both English and Spanish. In an age when it's next to impossible to reach a real person when dialing a hotline without first enduring a byzantine phone tree, CIS is old school. Callers who dial 1.800.4.CANCER are connected directly with front-line specialists who are experts at pairing patients with information individually tailored to their needs.

"They don't have scripts," said Adrianna Gutierrez, CIS director. "They take each client as an individual and assess their situation and their needs and find information specifically relevant to them."

The Cancer Information Service (CIS) is a free hotline that offers help in English and Spanish.

Phone: [1.800.4.CANCER](#) (1.800.422.6237)

Email: NCInfo@nih.gov

Live chat:

cancer.gov/contact

Hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. ET

CIS Smoking Quitline

Phone: [1.877.44U.QUIT](tel:187744UQUIT) (1.877.448.7848)

Hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. ET

“A lot of people say that’s what makes our service unique, that when they call, they connect emotionally with the person on the end of the line,” she said. “They are talking to an individual during a time when a lot of people expect to be talking to a robot or AI. People will start out the conversation on live chat thinking that it’s a chatbot. Once our specialists start responding with empathy, the person on the other end will say, ‘Are you a real person?’”

In the past, CIS supported 26 contact centers scattered around the country, including Fred Hutch. By 2009, all those centers were consolidated at Fred Hutch. Now, CIS includes 40-plus cancer information specialists, half of whom are bilingual. Most specialists work remotely, although there is a small presence on Fred Hutch’s campus in Seattle.

Many specialists have backgrounds in communications, education or customer service.

“They essentially are lay health educators,” said Gutierrez. “We do extensive training to help them understand the basics of cancer and tobacco cessation. They have to be able to break down complex information in a way that is understandable to the average person.”

The information that the specialists share is pulled from the NCI website.

“Anyone can contact us and we use the NCI database and clinicaltrials.gov to do curated searches for people impacted by cancer,” said Gutierrez. “We also provide case management to clinical trial clients. We follow up to see if they have any questions, if the information we sent meets their needs.

“The public finds this especially helpful at a time when there is so much questionable information out there on the internet,” said Gutierrez. “It’s important that people have access to science-based information that the government devotes a lot of dollars to at NCI. The public deserves to see what the results are.”

Each day, CIS handles about 200 inquiries from across the country — more than half are phone calls, and a third are live chat. People — often relatives, friends or caregivers — typically contact CIS when they are in the early stages of researching a diagnosis. They're often the ones doing the initial outreach because the patient may feel too overwhelmed to dive into information-gathering.

"It's important that they have all the information to make the best decision for themselves or loved ones," said Gutierrez. "We can help them along that pathway."

More than cancer

CIS's mission transcends information about cancer; it also provides help finding financial assistance, resources for coping and support, and assistance for people interested in quitting smoking. They work with the US. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide tobacco cessation services to veterans.

Gutierrez assumed the leadership of CIS after the retirement of Dawn Sittauer, who had spent 35 years with CIS. Sittauer began as an information specialist, then rose through the ranks to become director.

"In a world where Dr. Google can lead you down some very strange uncurated roads, it's good to know there's a trusted source for cancer information," said Sittauer in a [Fred Hutch article](#) published during the pandemic.

Sittauer hired Gutierrez and mentored her professionally and personally. When Sittauer died of cancer in 2025, the importance of the information that CIS dispenses was reinforced for Gutierrez and the entire CIS team.

"Dawn saw the value in CIS even before her diagnosis, but after her diagnosis, she had a personal understanding," said Gutierrez. "She was the type of person who found comfort in the research and wanted to know everything about her diagnosis."

[Garnet Anderson, PhD](#), who represents Fred Hutch leadership to NCI staff when they conduct site visits, notes that because CIS operates independently of any care provider, pharmaceutical or advocacy group, patients can feel confident that the information CIS shares isn't influenced by special interests or marketing.

"CIS provides an incredible resource to individuals and families who are caught in the snares of cancer and may not have access to the well-informed and supportive environment that we have here at Fred Hutch," said Anderson, who holds the Fred Hutch 40th Anniversary Endowed Chair.

For patients and families who can't easily access well-resourced comprehensive cancer centers such as Fred Hutch, CIS offers a lifeline.

"Our service relies on people knowing about us and the fact that we exist," said Gutierrez.

Bonnie Rochman is a senior editor and writer at Fred Hutch Cancer Center. A former health and parenting writer for Time, she has written a popular science book about genetics, “The Gene Machine: How Genetic Technologies Are Changing the Way We Have Kids—and the Kids We Have.” Reach her at brochman@fredhutch.org.

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