

Demystifying Clinical Trials: Should I Participate?

You may not feel as if you have much choice when it comes to health care for a serious illness. But whether or not to join a clinical trial is completely up to you. In fact, that may be one of the most powerful reasons to participate. [Silvia Hafziger, MD](#), Psychiatry, Columbia University Department of Surgery, explains, “In the face of a debilitating disease, patients’ ability to be proactive can provide a sense of autonomy and make them feel like true partners in their own treatment.”

So, how do you decide? First, get the facts about clinical trials. Questions you should ask include:

- What is the purpose of or reason for this clinical trial?
- Why do you think the experimental treatment may be helpful?
- Has it ever been tested before in other trials?
- Who can be in the study?
- What treatments and tests are involved?
- What are the pros and cons of this trial? What are the possible risks or side effects? How do those risks compare with risks of conventional treatment?
- How will the trial affect my daily life?
- How long will the trial last?
- Will I have to be hospitalized?
- Who will pay for my treatment? Will my insurance cover the costs?
- Will I be paid for extra driving mileage or hotel stays?
- Will I need to make extra trips or visits?
- Can I stay in my own town or will I have to travel?
- Can I quit before the end of the trial? How would I do that?
- Will I know what treatment I receive or will it be a blind study?

Once you have gathered all this information, it’s time to weight the benefits and risks, pros and cons of participating in clinical trials.

Benefits

- You are taking charge of your own health care and can feel more pro-active.
- You are helping others by contributing to medical research, both today and into the future.
- You may get valuable new treatment methods that you can’t get outside a clinical trial, before they’re available to the general public.
- You can receive the best medical care at top hospitals or clinics.
- You may have fewer side effects than from traditional treatment.

Risks

- New treatments or medications may not be more effective than your current care. If an experimental treatment does have benefits, it’s possible it may not work for you specifically.
- Unexpected risks or side effects may be worse than those from the normal treatment, and may be uncomfortable or even serious.
- All your costs may not be covered.
- You may need more frequent and more time-consuming visits to the hospital or clinic as well as more complicated treatment, e.g. drug dosages.

According to studies, if you do participate in a clinical trial, your outcome will be as good as, if not better than, those who do not participate no matter what treatment you receive. The bottom line: By joining a clinical trial, you can play a more active role in your health care, gain access to new treatments before they are widely available, and help others through medical research.