Clinical trials, also called cancer treatment or research studies, test new treatments in people with cancer. The goal of this research is to find better ways to treat cancer and help cancer patients. Clinical trials test many types of treatments, or new methods such as gene therapy.

A clinical trial is one of the final stages of a long and careful cancer research process. The search for new treatments begins in the laboratory, where scientists first develop and test new ideas. If an approach seems promising, the next step may be testing a treatment in animals to see how it affects cancer in a living being and whether it has harmful effects. Of course, treatments that work well in the lab or in animals do not always work well in people. Studies are done with cancer patients to find out whether promising treatments are safe and effective.

Why are clinical trials important?

First, cancer affects us all, whether we have it, care about someone who does, or worry about getting it in the future. Clinical trials contribute to knowledge and progress against cancer. If a new treatment proves effective in a study, it may become a new standard treatment that can help many patients. Many of today's most effective standard treatments are based on previous study results. Examples include treatments for breast, colon, rectal, and childhood cancers. Clinical trials may also answer important scientific questions and suggest future research directions. Because of progress made through clinical trials, many people treated for cancer are now living longer.

Second, the patients who take part may be helped personally by the treatments they receive. They get up-to-date care from cancer experts, and they receive either a new treatment being

tested or the best available standard treatment for their cancer. Of course, there is no guarantee that a new treatment being tested or a standard treatment will produce good results. New treatments also may have unknown risks. But if a new treatment proves effective or more effective than standard treatment, study patients who receive it may be among the first to benefit. Some patients receive only standard treatment and benefit from it.

In the past, clinical trials were sometimes seen as a last resort for people who had no other treatment choices. Today, patients with common cancers often choose to receive their first treatment in a clinical trial.

What is it like to receive treatment in a clinical trial?

When you take part in a clinical trial, you receive your treatment in a cancer center, hospital, clinic, and/or doctor's office. Doctors, nurses, social workers, and other health professionals may be part of your treatment team. They will follow your progress closely. You may have more tests and doctor visits than you would if you were not taking part in a study. You will follow a treatment plan your doctor prescribes, and you may also have other responsibilities such as keeping a log or filling out forms about your health. Some studies continue to check on patients even after their treatment is over.