How to understand the risks and benefits of health care choices

People who must make a choice about their health care need to understand the risks and benefits of the different choices they might make.

This fact sheet says what doctors might mean when they say that something is "common" or "rare". The fact sheet has ideas about questions you can ask doctors to better understand health benefits and risks.

The fact sheet can be used by family members and carers. You can use this fact sheet to get information to help with supported decision making. The fact sheet can support choices about things like:

- having surgery
- taking new medicine
- saying no to treatment
- other health decisions.

An example of using information about risks and benefits

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A doctor might tell a patient called Sam that he should start taking a new medicine. Most medicines have some benefits and some risks. Risks to do with medicine are often called side effects.

The doctor might tell Sam that it is common for people to feel better when they take the medicine. The doctor might also say that some people have side effects they don't like but the side effects are rare.

To make an informed choice about whether he wants to try the new medicine, it would be helpful for Sam to know:

- how many people out of 100 feel better when they take the medicine
- how many people out of 100 have side effects they don't like when they take the medicine.

Information about benefits and risks can help Sam make the best decision for him.

We trust this resource

We trust this resource because it is:

- Made to help, not for profit
- Made by people who know a lot about the topic

We've checked this resource, and you can follow our guide to know if health information is true and right for you.

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