

# spotlight

## Coastal Cancer Center, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina



**C**oastal Cancer Center is a private oncology practice with four locations across South Carolina's Grand Strand, bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Established in 1982, Coastal Cancer Center has been a pillar in its community for decades. In 2010, it was the first practice in the state to become Quality Oncology Practice Initiative certified.

The cancer center has a unique patient demographic in that Myrtle Beach is one of the top 25 retirement destinations in the United States, creating a growing and diverse patient population. When describing patient demographics, Emily Touloukian, DO, medical oncologist and hematologist and president of Coastal Cancer Center, said, "We have a lot of snowbirds and people who retire in the area." A quarter of its patients are over the age of 65, and many of them have multiple healthcare providers—increasing the difficulty of maintaining a comprehensive record of each patient's care. "When you share your patients with another doctor, it is important to keep the lines of communication open," Dr. Touloukian explained. "We

make it a priority to work well with all of the patient's physicians."

Coastal Cancer Center's patient-centered ethos is characterized by flexibility, convenience, and geographic location. The largest of the cancer center's four offices is in Myrtle Beach, which is open seven days a week with office visits and infusion services available on Saturdays and Sundays. "It seems like everything happens at five o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, so we want our patients to know that we are always here for them," Dr. Touloukian said.

### Community-Based Care

The medical oncology clinic at Coastal Cancer Center is structured in pods. Each pod has a room where oncologists chart with their respective medical assistants, and each medical oncologist is responsible for three exam rooms. Oncologists, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants rotate through Coastal Cancer Center's four South Carolina clinic locations—in Myrtle Beach, Conway, Loris, and Murrells Inlet.

The Myrtle Beach infusion suite has 20 infusion chairs and a full-service pharmacy. Located along the main hallway of the clinic, the pharmacy is only a few steps from the front desk and infusion suite. A pharmacist, two pharmacy technicians, and four mixing technicians support the pharmacy and fill prescriptions on-site.

The Conway clinic is Coastal Cancer Center's second-largest facility. It has 12 infusion chairs and is open five days a week. Computed tomography and positron emission tomography scans are available at the Myrtle Beach and Conway clinic locations, making them a one-stop shop for those presenting to the cancer center.

The Loris and Murrells Inlet infusion suites have seven and eight infusion chairs, respectively, and are both open three days a week. "Having multiple locations is really convenient for our patients because we are close to them, no matter where they live," Dr. Touloukian said.

All Coastal Cancer Center infusion suites are staffed with oncology-certified registered



nurses. These nurses are positioned with a vantage point that provides a clear view of every patient—a necessary precaution in case patients experience a reaction to their treatment. Patients also have access to a television and/or a garden view during their treatment to support their comfort.

The oncologists, medical assistants, and nurses at Coastal Cancer Center are assigned to regular locations on specific days. “We want to be consistent for our patients,” Dr. Touloukian said. Because the Myrtle Beach location is the only clinic open seven days a week, patients who frequent any of the other three centers can be seen at the Myrtle Beach clinic if they require care during the weekend.

Coastal Cancer Center works directly with other cancer care teams throughout the area to treat patients requiring radiation or surgical treatment.

### Patient Support Services

A new patient coordinator receives all referrals and inquiries directly from patients who request an appointment. These new patient coordinators are responsible for contacting patients and scheduling them for a consultation within one week. During their first appointment, patients meet with the oncologist responsible for their care and discuss their treatment plan. Nurse practitioners and physician assistants then conduct a chemotherapy teaching session with patients to lay out their plan of care, discuss expectations, and ensure that the patient and their family are ready to start the treatment process.

Before beginning treatment, a patient representative meets with each patient to assist with any questions regarding their insurance coverage and treatment costs. If a patient needs financial assistance, the patient representative can help them apply for grants or navigate the Marketplace. Patients can also apply for funding from Coastal Cancer Center’s non-profit organization, the Carolina Cancer Foundation, to cover their treatment-related costs. Patient representatives are available to help patients at any point during their cancer journey. “Cancer treatments are very expensive and can be a terrible financial burden,” Dr. Touloukian said. “We always try to help our patients navigate that part of treatment and ease what burdens we can.”

Coastal Cancer Center has a survivorship program to help patients transition back to their everyday routine after treatment. A few weeks following the completion of their treatment, patients return to the cancer center for a survivorship appointment at any of Coastal Cancer Center’s four clinic locations. A nurse practitioner or physician assistant sits down with the patient to help them create a transition plan as they resume their day-to-day lives after cancer. During this visit, patients and providers will discuss the frequency of check-ups and screenings going forward, as well as any changes that patients may experience in their life post-treatment.

### Delivering Care During the Pandemic

Coastal Cancer Center remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We did not close our doors for a single day,” Dr. Touloukian said. The pharmacy, lab, and imaging services it has available helped reduce the exposure risks their patients incurred during treatment throughout the pandemic because patients could receive their medication and complete any blood work and scans in one location.

Though COVID-19 was challenging for providers, patients, and staff to navigate, the pandemic also brought new ideas. “It showed us how innovative we can be,” Dr.



Touloukian said. Telehealth services were an innovation inspired by the pandemic that cancer center staff continue to use regularly. These services have improved the quality of care provided to older adults, who may also receive care outside South Carolina. “One of the ways I use telehealth now is to bring families into the exam room,” Dr. Touloukian said. “Loved ones who are out of state or may not be able to make it to the office can now attend visits with their family members.” 