If You Have Stomach Cancer

Jump to a topic

- What is stomach cancer?
- Different kinds of stomach cancer
- How does the doctor know I have stomach cancer?
- How serious is my cancer?
- What kind of treatment will I need?
- What will happen after treatment?

What is stomach cancer?

Cancer can start any place in the body. Stomach cancer starts in the stomach and is also called \textit{gastric} (GAS-trick) cancer. It starts when cells in the stomach grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. Cancer cells in the stomach can sometimes travel to the liver and grow there. When cancer cells do this, it’s called metastasis (pronounced meh-TAS-tuh-sis). To doctors, the cancer cells in the new place look just like the ones from the stomach.

Cancer is always named for the place where it starts. So when stomach cancer spreads to the liver (or any other place), it’s still called stomach cancer. It’s not called liver cancer unless it starts from cells in the liver.
The stomach

Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where your cancer is.

Different kinds of stomach cancer

There are many types of stomach cancer. Some are very rare. Most stomach cancers are a type called adenocarcinoma. This cancer starts from cells that line the inside of the stomach. The terms stomach cancer or gastric cancer almost always refers to this type of cancer. Your doctor can tell you more about the type you have.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Why do you think I have cancer?
- Is there a chance I don’t have cancer?
Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
What will happen next?

How does the doctor know I have stomach cancer?

Tests that may be done

Symptoms of stomach cancer can be:

- belly pain
- losing weight without trying
- feeling full too soon after eating, not eating, feeling sick to your stomach, and heartburn

If you have signs of stomach cancer, your doctor will ask you questions about your health and do a physical exam. If signs are still pointing to stomach cancer, more tests will be done. Here are some of the tests you may need:

**Upper endoscopy or EGD for short**: This is the main test to find stomach cancer. To do this test, a bendable, thin tube with a tiny light and video camera on the end is put in your mouth and passed down into your throat and stomach. If there are any spots that look like cancer, a small piece of tissue can be taken out through the tube and checked for cancer cells.

**Endoscopic ultrasound or EUS for short**: To do this test, a small probe is placed on the tip of a thin tube that is passed down the throat into the stomach. It uses sound waves to make pictures of your insides. It can also be used to take out small pieces of tissue that can be checked for cancer. EUS can be done during endoscopy.

**Upper GI series**: This test is a series of x-rays taken after you swallow barium, a thick, chalky liquid that shows up on x-rays. This can show problems that involve the inside of the throat, stomach, and part of the small intestine.

**CT or CAT scan**: Uses x-rays to make detailed pictures of your insides. This can show the size of the cancer and its spread.

**MRI scan**: Uses radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to make detailed pictures. This test can show more about the size of the cancer and its spread.
PET scan: Uses a special kind of sugar that can be seen inside your body with a special camera. If there is cancer, this sugar shows up as “hot spots” where the cancer is found. This test can help show if the cancer has spread.

Lab tests: Lab tests offer details about your health status. They can be used to find problems and guide treatment.

Biopsy

In a biopsy, the doctor takes out a small piece of tissue where the cancer seems to be. The tissue is checked for cancer cells. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if you have cancer. For stomach cancer, a biopsy is most often done during an endoscopy.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- Who can explain them to me?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

How serious is my cancer?

If you have stomach cancer, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called staging. You may have heard other people say that their cancer was “stage 1” or “stage 2.” Your doctor will want to find out the stage of your cancer to help decide what type of treatment is best for you.

The stage describes the growth or spread of the cancer through the stomach. It also tells if the cancer has spread to other organs of your body that are close by or farther away.

Your cancer can be stage 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means a more serious cancer that has spread beyond the stomach. Be sure to ask the doctor about the cancer stage and what it means for you.

Questions to ask the doctor
• Do you know the stage of the cancer?
• If not, how and when will you find out the stage of the cancer?
• Would you explain to me what the stage means in my case?
• Based on the stage of the cancer, how long do you think I’ll live?
• What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many ways to treat stomach cancer, but the main types of treatment are surgery, chemotherapy, targeted drugs, and radiation. A lot of times treatments are used together.

The treatment plan that’s best for you will depend on:

• The stage and grade of the cancer
• The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
• Your age
• Other health problems you have
• Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that come with it

Surgery for stomach cancer

Surgery is often part of the treatment for stomach cancer if it can be done. There are different kinds of surgery. The type that’s best for you depends on the kind of stomach cancer, how big it is, and where it is. Ask your doctor what kind of surgery you will have and what to expect.

Side effects of surgery

Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Be sure to ask the doctor what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat people with stomach cancer should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

Chemo

Chemo is the short word for chemotherapy – the use of drugs to fight cancer. The drugs may be given into a vein or taken as pills. These drugs go into the blood and spread
through the body. Chemo is given in cycles or rounds. Each round of treatment is followed by a break. Most of the time, 2 or more chemo drugs are given. Treatment often lasts for many months. Chemo can be given before or after surgery. It can also be given together with radiation. Ask your doctor what to expect.

**Side effects of chemo**

Chemo can make you feel very tired, sick to your stomach, have diarrhea, mouth sores, and cause your hair to fall out. But these problems go away after treatment ends.

There are ways to treat most chemo side effects. If you have side effects, be sure to talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

**Targeted therapy**

Targeted therapy drugs are newer treatments that may be used for some types of stomach cancer. These drugs affect mainly cancer cells and not normal cells in the body. They may work even if other treatment doesn’t. These drugs have different side effects from chemo and they are often not as bad.

**Immunotherapy**

Immunotherapy is treatment that boosts the immune system or uses man-made parts of the immune system to help fight off or kill kidney cancer cells. (The immune system is how the body resists and fights germs and some kinds of cancer.) One type of immunotherapy are used to treat stomach cancer. These drugs may be given into a vein or as a shot under the skin.

**Side effects of immunotherapy**

Immunotherapy effects depend on which drug is used. These drugs can often make you feel tired, sick to your stomach, and can cause fever, chills, and rashes. Most of these problems go away after treatment ends.

There are ways to treat most of the side effects caused by immunotherapy. If you have side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

**Radiation treatments**

Radiation uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. It can be aimed at the cancer from a machine outside the body. This is called external beam radiation.
Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, talk about what side effects might happen. Side effects depend on the type of radiation that’s used. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Most side effects get better after treatment ends. Some might last longer. Talk to your cancer care team about what you can expect.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

Clinical trials are one way to get the newest cancer treatments. They are the best way for doctors to find better ways to treat cancer. Still, they’re not right for everyone. And it’s up to you whether to take part in a clinical trial.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials that might be right for you, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital conducts clinical trials. See Clinical Trials\(^1\) to learn more.

What about other treatments I hear about?

When you have cancer you might hear about other ways to treat the cancer or treat your symptoms. These may not always be standard medical treatments. These treatments may be vitamins, herbs, special diets, and other things. You may wonder about these treatments.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you’re thinking about using, whether it’s a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask the doctor
• What treatment do you think is best for me?
• What’s the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
• Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
• What will the surgery be like?
• Will I need other types of treatment, too?
• What’s the goal of these treatments?
• What side effects could I have from these treatments?
• What can I do about side effects that I might have?
• Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?
• What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if they are safe?
• How soon do I need to start treatment?
• What should I do to be ready for treatment?
• Is there anything I can do to help the treatment work better?
• What’s the next step?

What will happen after treatment?

You’ll be glad when treatment is over for years after treatment ends, you will see your cancer doctor. Be sure to go to all of these follow-up visits. During these visits, they will ask about symptoms and examine you. Lab tests, imaging tests, and endoscopy may be done depending on your symptoms. Follow-up is needed to watch for treatment side effects and to check for cancer that has come back or spread.

At first, your visits may be every 3 to 6 months. Then, the longer you’re cancer-free, the less often the visits are needed. After 5 years, they may be done once a year.

Having cancer and dealing with treatment can be hard, but it can also be a time to look at your life in new ways. You might be thinking about how to improve your health. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or talk to your cancer care team to find out what you can do to feel better.

You can’t change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making healthy choices and feeling as good as you can.

Hyperlinks

2. [http://www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**Words to know**

**Adenocarcinoma** (AD-no-KAR-suh-NO-muh): Cancer that starts in gland cells.

**Biopsy** (BY-op-see): Taking out a small piece of tissue to see if there are cancer cells in it.

**Endoscopy** (en-DOS-koh-pee): The use of a thin, flexible tube with a lens or tiny video camera on the end to look inside the body.

**Gastric** (GAS-trick): Of or referring to the stomach.

**Metastasis** (muh-TAS-tuh-sis): Cancer cells that have spread from where they started to other places in the body.

**How can I learn more?**

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

Last Medical Review: March 8, 2016 Last Revised: March 8, 2016

**Written by**


Our team is made up of doctors and oncology certified nurses with deep knowledge of cancer care as well as journalists, editors, and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy ([www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html](http://www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html)).