If You Have Cancer

What is cancer?

Cancer can start any place in the body. It starts when cells grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

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

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

Are there different kinds of cancer?

There are many types of cancer. Cancer can start in any part of the body. It can start in the lungs, the breast, the colon, or even in the blood.

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?
- Where do you think the cancer started?
- 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 cancer?

The symptoms of cancer depend on the type of cancer, where the cancer is, how big it is, and how much it affects other parts of your body. Talk to your doctor about any changes you’ve noticed. Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and do a physical exam.

Tests that may be done

If signs are pointing to cancer, tests will be done. Here are some of the tests you may need:

Lab tests: Blood and urine tests can be used to help find some types of cancer. They can also be used to find out how well your body is working.

Ultrasound: For this test, a small wand is moved around on your skin. It gives off sound waves and picks up the echoes as they bounce off tissues. The echoes are made into a picture on a computer screen.

X-rays: X-rays of the part of your body that might have cancer are sometimes the first tests done. A chest x-ray may also be done to see if the cancer has spread to your lungs.

CT or CAT scan: This test uses x-rays to make detailed pictures of the inside of your body. This test may be done to look for cancer or to see if it has spread.

MRI scan: MRIs use radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to make detailed pictures of the inside of your body. MRIs can show the tumor and other parts of the body.

PET scan: PET scans use a 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.

Endoscopy (en-DAHS-kuh-pee): This is when a thin, lighted tube is put into your body to look inside. The tube may be put in through a small cut in the skin or through a natural opening, like your mouth. The tube lets the doctor look at the tumor and other nearby body parts. A biopsy can be done with tools put into the tube.
**Biopsy:** In a biopsy (BY-op-see), the doctor takes out a small piece of the lump to check it for cancer cells. A biopsy is often the only way to tell for sure if you have cancer. There are many ways to do a biopsy. The type used will depend on the size of the lump and where it is in your body. Ask your doctor what kind you will need.

**Bone marrow aspiration (ASP-er-AY-shun) and biopsy:** For this test, a hollow needle is put into the center of a bone (most often the back of your hip) to take out a small amount of the liquid inside called bone marrow. (This is where blood cells are made.) The bone marrow is tested to see if there are cancer cells in it.

**Grading cancer**

The cancer cells in the biopsy sample might be given a grade. This can help doctors predict how fast the cancer is likely to grow and spread. The grade is based on how much the cancer cells look like normal cells. Cells that look very different from normal cells are given a higher grade and tend to grow faster. Ask the doctor to explain the grade of your cancer.

**Questions to ask the doctor**

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- When 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?

**Why me?**

People with cancer often ask “Did I do something to cause my cancer?” or “Why me?” Because doctors don’t know for sure what causes cancer in most cases, many people come up with their own ideas about why it happened.

Some people believe they’re being punished for something they did or didn’t do in the past. Most people wonder if they did something to cause the cancer. Some think that if they had done something differently, they could have prevented it.

If you’re having these thoughts, you’re not alone. They’re common among people with
cancer. But cancer isn’t a punishment for things you did or didn’t do. Blaming yourself just makes you feel worse, and it rarely helps. It’s almost never possible to know exactly what caused the cancer. Focus instead on taking good care of yourself now – both your body and your mind.

Some people ask “How long have I had cancer?” looking for an event or change that may be linked to cancer starting. Others are trying to figure out if they should have noticed a change earlier and done something about it. But there’s no way to say for sure how long you’ve had cancer.

Risk factors

We don’t yet know what causes all cancers. We do know that there are certain things called risk factors that affect your chance of getting some diseases.

Some risk factors for cancer can be changed and others can’t. Risk factors that can’t be changed include your age, sex, and family history. Things that can be changed are things you do, such as whether you use tobacco or drink alcohol, what you eat, and how much sun you get. Other risk factors are linked to things in the environment that cause cancer.

Having a risk factor, or even many risk factors, doesn’t mean that you’ll get cancer. And some people who get cancer may have few or no known risk factors. Even if a person with cancer has a risk factor, it’s very hard to know what part that risk factor may have had in causing the cancer.

How serious is my cancer?

If you have cancer, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called staging. 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 how much the cancer has grown in the area where it started. It also tells if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body.

Your cancer may be stage 0, 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 from where it first started.

Some kinds of cancer are staged using other systems. Ask the doctor about the stage of your cancer 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?

Am I going to die?

It’s normal to think about dying if you’ve just been told you have cancer. You may feel better knowing that the outlook for many people diagnosed with cancer is very good. Many people still believe that “cancer = death.” But the fact is that most cancers can be treated. There are millions of people living in the United States today who have or had cancer.

The survival rate among different cancers varies greatly, so you’ll want to look at how well treatment works for your type of cancer. Numbers can give you an overall picture, but keep in mind that every person is unique. Statistics can’t predict exactly what will happen to you. Talk with your cancer care team if you have questions about your own chances of a cure, or how long you might survive your cancer. They know your situation best.

What kind of treatment will I need?

The main types of treatment for cancer are:

- Surgery (SUR-jur-ee)
- Radiation (RAY-dee-A-shun) treatments
- Chemotherapy (KEY-mo-THAIR-uh-pee)
- Targeted drugs
- Immunotherapy (IM-yuh-no-THAIR-uh-pee) drugs

Often more than one kind of treatment is used. The treatment plan that’s best for you will depend on:

- The exact type of cancer
- The stage and grade of the cancer
• Where the cancer is
• The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
• Your age and overall health
• Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that come with it

Surgery

Surgery is often used to take out the tumor and a margin or edge of the healthy tissue around it. The type of surgery done depends on where the tumor is. Ask your doctor if you will need surgery, 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. Ask the doctor what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat cancer should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

Radiation treatments

Radiation uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. It may be used along with other treatments like surgery or chemo to treat some cancers. Sometimes radiation alone can kill the cancer cells. Radiation can also be used to help treat symptoms like pain and swelling if the cancer has spread.

Radiation can be aimed at the tumor from a machine outside the body. This is called external beam radiation.

Radiation can also be given by putting a small source of radiation in or near the tumor. This is called brachytherapy (BRAKE-ee-THAIR-uh-pee).

Sometimes, both types of radiation are used.

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 and the area being treated. Common side effects of radiation are:

• Skin changes where the radiation is given
• Feeling very tired
Most side effects get better after treatment ends. Some might last longer. Talk to your cancer care team about what you can expect during and after treatment.

**Chemo**

Chemo (KEY-mo) is the short word for chemotherapy, the use of drugs to fight cancer. The drugs are often given through a needle into a vein. They can also be given as shots or pills. These drugs go into the blood and spread through the body.

Chemo is often 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.

**Side effects of chemo**

Chemo can make you feel very tired, sick to your stomach, and cause your hair to fall out. Some chemo drugs can have other side effects. But these problems go away after treatment ends.

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

**Targeted drugs**

Targeted drugs are made to work mostly on the changes in cells that make them cancer. These drugs affect mainly cancer cells and not normal cells in the body. They may work even if other treatment doesn’t. They may be given alone or along with chemo.

**Side effects of targeted drugs**

Side effects depend on which drug is used. These drugs often make you feel sick to your stomach and might cause chills, fever, rashes, and headaches. Some cause low blood counts and heart and liver problems. Side effects often go away after treatment ends.

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

**Immunotherapy drugs**
These treatments help the body’s own immune system fight the cancer. Immune treatments can be very helpful in treating some types of cancer. These treatments are most often given through a needle into a vein.

**Side effects of immune therapy drugs**

Side effects depend on which drug is used. Some might cause a fever or make you feel sick. Rarely, these drugs can cause more serious side effects. If you have side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

**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.

If you would like to be in a clinical trial, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital takes part in clinical trials.

Clinical trials are one way to get the newest cancer treatment. They are the best way for doctors to find better ways to treat cancer. If your doctor can find one that’s studying the kind of cancer you have, it’s up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

**What about other treatments that 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, 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**

- Will I need to see other doctors?
- 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?
• How will my body look and work after surgery?
• Will I need other types of treatment, too?
• What will these treatments be like?
• 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?
• Will I be able to exercise during treatment?
• Will I be able to work during treatment?
• Will I be able to have children after treatment?
• Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?
• What about 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. But it’s hard not to worry about cancer coming back. Even when cancer never comes back, people still worry about it. For years after treatment ends, you will see your cancer doctor. At first, your visits may be every few months. Then, the longer you’re cancer-free, the less often the visits are needed.

Be sure to go to all of these follow-up visits. Your doctors will ask about symptoms, do physical exams, and may do tests to see if the cancer has come back.

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 doctor 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

3. [www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/staging.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/staging.html)

**Words to know**

**Adenocarcinoma** (AD-no-KAR-suh-NO-muh): Cancer that starts in the gland cells that line certain organs and make and release substances into the body, such as mucus, digestive juices, or other fluids.

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

**Bone marrow**: The soft middle part of some bones where new blood cells are made.

**Carcinoma** (CAR-sin-O-muh): Cancer that starts in the lining layer of organs. Most cancers are carcinomas.

**Immune system**: The body system that fights infection.

**Immunotherapy** (IM-yuh-no-THAIR-uh-pee): Treatments that uses the body’s immune system to fight cancer.

**Leukemia** (loo-KEY-me-uh): Cancer that starts in the blood.

**Lymph nodes** (limf nodes): Small, bean-shaped collections of immune system tissue found all over the body and connected by lymph vessels; also called lymph glands.

**Lymphoma** (lim-FOAM-uh): Cancer that starts in the immune system cells called lymphocytes (LIM-fo-sites), which are a kind of white blood cell.

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

Oncologist (on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who treats people who have cancer.

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)⁹. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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