Treating Thyroid Cancer

Making treatment decisions

Depending on the type and stage of your thyroid cancer, you may need more than one type of treatment. Doctors on your cancer treatment team may include:

- A surgeon: a doctor who uses surgery to treat cancers or other problems
- An endocrinologist: a doctor who treats diseases in glands that secrete hormones
- A radiation oncologist: a doctor who uses radiation to treat cancer
- A medical oncologist: a doctor who uses chemotherapy and other medicines to treat cancer

Many other specialists may be involved in your care as well, including nurse practitioners, nurses, psychologists, social workers, rehabilitation specialists, and other health professionals.

After thyroid cancer is found and staged, your cancer care team will discuss your treatment options with you. It is important to take the time to consider each of your options. In choosing a treatment plan, factors to consider include the type and stage of the cancer and your general health. The treatment options for thyroid cancer might include:

- Surgery
- Radioactive iodine treatment
- Thyroid hormone therapy
- External beam radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- Targeted therapy

Often 2 or more of these options are combined.

Most thyroid cancers can be cured, especially if they have not spread to distant parts of
the body. If the cancer can’t be cured, the goal of treatment may be to remove or
destroy as much of the cancer as possible and to keep it from growing, spreading, or
returning for as long as possible. Sometimes treatment is aimed at palliating (relieving)
symptoms such as pain or problems with breathing and swallowing.

If you have any concerns about your treatment plan, if time permits it is often a good
idea to get a second opinion. In fact, many doctors encourage this. A second opinion
can provide more information and help you feel confident about the treatment plan you
choose.

Some treatments for thyroid cancer might affect your ability to have children later in life.
If this might be a concern for you, talk to your doctor about it before you decide on
treatment. For more information, see Fertility and Women With Cancer or Fertility and
Men With Cancer.

Getting a second opinion

If time allows, you may also want to get a second opinion from another doctor or
medical team. This can give you more information and help you feel more certain about
the treatment plan you choose. If you aren’t sure where to go for a second opinion, ask
your doctor for help.

Thinking about taking part in a clinical trial

Clinical trials are carefully controlled research studies that are done to get a closer look
at promising new treatments or procedures. Clinical trials are one way to get state-of-
the art cancer treatment. In some cases, they may be the only way to get access to
newer treatments. They are also the best way for doctors to learn better methods to
treat cancer. Still, they are not right for everyone.

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 to
learn more.

Considering complementary and alternative methods

You may hear about alternative or complementary methods that your doctor hasn’t
mentioned to treat your cancer or relieve symptoms. These methods can include
vitamins, herbs, and special diets, or other methods such as acupuncture or massage,
to name a few.
Complementary methods refer to treatments that are used along with your regular medical care. Alternative treatments are used instead of a doctor’s medical treatment. Although some of these methods might be helpful in relieving symptoms or helping you feel better, many have not been proven to work. Some might even be dangerous.

Be sure to talk to your cancer care team about any method you are thinking about using. They can help you learn what is known (or not known) about the method, which can help you make an informed decision. See Complementary and Alternative Medicine to learn more.

**Help getting through cancer treatment**

Your cancer care team will be your first source of information and support, but there are other resources for help when you need it. Hospital- or clinic-based support services are an important part of your care. These might include nursing or social work services, financial aid, nutritional advice, rehab, or spiritual help.

The American Cancer Society also has programs and services – including rides to treatment, lodging, and more – to help you get through treatment. Call our National Cancer Information Center at 1-800-227-2345 and speak with one of our trained specialists.

The next few sections describe the types of treatment used for thyroid cancers. This is followed by a description of the most common approaches based on the type and stage of the cancer.

The treatment information given here is not official policy of the American Cancer Society and is not intended as medical advice to replace the expertise and judgment of your cancer care team. It is intended to help you and your family make informed decisions, together with your doctor. Your doctor may have reasons for suggesting a treatment plan different from these general treatment options. Don’t hesitate to ask him or her questions about your treatment options.

**Surgery for Thyroid Cancer**

Surgery is the main treatment in nearly every case of thyroid cancer, except for some anaplastic thyroid cancers. If thyroid cancer is diagnosed by a fine needle aspiration (FNA) biopsy, surgery to remove the tumor and all or part of the remaining thyroid gland is usually recommended.
Lobectomy

This operation is sometimes used to treat differentiated (papillary or follicular) thyroid cancers that are small and show no signs of spread beyond the thyroid gland. It is also sometimes used to diagnose thyroid cancer if an FNA biopsy result doesn't provide a clear diagnosis (see Tests for Thyroid Cancer).

First, the surgeon makes an incision (cut) a few inches long across the front of the neck and exposes the thyroid. The lobe containing the cancer is then removed, usually along with the isthmus (the small piece of the gland that acts as a bridge between the left and right lobes).

An advantage of this surgery, is that some patients might not need to take thyroid hormone pills afterward because it leaves part of the gland behind. But having some thyroid left can interfere with some tests that look for cancer recurrence after treatment, such as radioiodine scans and thyroglobulin blood tests.

Thyroidectomy

Thyroidectomy is surgery to remove the thyroid gland. As with lobectomy, this is typically done through an incision a few inches long across the front of the neck.

This is the most common surgery for thyroid cancer. If the entire thyroid gland is removed, it is called a total thyroidectomy. Sometimes the surgeon may not be able to remove the entire thyroid. If nearly all of the gland is removed, it is called a near-total thyroidectomy. If most of the gland is removed, it is called a subtotal thyroidectomy.

After a thyroidectomy (and possibly radioactive iodine [radioiodine] therapy), you will need to take daily thyroid hormone (levothyroxine) pills. But one advantage of this surgery over lobectomy is that your doctor can most often watch you for disease recurrence afterward using radioiodine scans and thyroglobulin blood tests.

Lymph node removal

If cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes in the neck, these will be removed at the same time surgery is done on the thyroid. This is especially important for treatment of medullary thyroid cancer and for anaplastic cancer (when surgery is an option).

For papillary or follicular cancer where only 1 or 2 enlarged lymph nodes are thought to contain cancer, the enlarged nodes may be removed and any small deposits of cancer cells that may be left are then treated with radioactive iodine (see the section about
radioactive iodine [radioiodine] therapy). More often, several lymph nodes near the thyroid are removed in an operation called a central compartment neck dissection. Removal of even more lymph nodes, including those on the side of the neck, is called a modified radical neck dissection.

Risks and side effects of thyroid surgery

Complications are less likely to happen when your operation is done by an experienced thyroid surgeon. Patients who have thyroid surgery are often ready to leave the hospital within a day after the operation. Potential complications of thyroid surgery include:

- Temporary or permanent hoarseness or loss of voice. This can happen if the larynx (voice box) or windpipe is irritated by the breathing tube that was used during surgery. It may also occur if the nerves to the larynx (or vocal cords) are damaged during surgery. The doctor should examine your vocal cords before surgery to see if they move normally (see Tests for Thyroid Cancer).
- Damage to the parathyroid glands (small glands near the thyroid that help regulate blood calcium levels). This can lead to low blood calcium levels, causing muscle spasms and numbness and tingling sensations.
- Excessive bleeding or formation of a major blood clot in the neck (called a hematoma)
- Wound infection

You will have a small scar across the front of your neck after surgery. This should become less noticeable over time as it heals.

If most or all of your thyroid gland is removed, you will need to take daily thyroid hormone replacement pills. All patients who have had near-total or total thyroidectomy will need to do this.

For more information about cancer surgery in general, see Cancer Surgery.

- References
See all references for Thyroid Cancer

Last Medical Review: March 31, 2016 Last Revised: April 15, 2016

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy.
Radioactive Iodine (Radioiodine) Therapy for Thyroid Cancer

Your thyroid gland absorbs nearly all of the iodine in your body. When radioactive iodine (RAI), also known as I-131, is taken into the body in liquid or capsule form, it concentrates in thyroid cells. The radiation can destroy the thyroid gland and any other thyroid cells (including cancer cells) that take up iodine, with little effect on the rest of your body. The radiation dose used here is much stronger than the one used in radioiodine scans, which were described in Tests for Thyroid Cancer.

This treatment can be used to ablate (destroy) any thyroid tissue not removed by surgery or to treat some types of thyroid cancer that have spread to lymph nodes and other parts of the body.

Radioactive iodine therapy improves the survival rate of patients with papillary or follicular thyroid cancer (differentiated thyroid cancer) that has spread to the neck or other body parts, and this treatment is now standard practice in such cases. But the benefits of RAI therapy are less clear for patients with small cancers of the thyroid gland that do not seem to have spread, which can often be removed completely with surgery. Discuss your risks and benefits of RAI therapy with your doctor. Radioactive iodine therapy cannot be used to treat anaplastic (undifferentiated) and medullary thyroid carcinomas because these types of cancer do not take up iodine.

For RAI therapy to be most effective, patients must have high levels of thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH or thyrotropin) in the blood. This substance stimulates thyroid tissue (and cancer cells) to take up radioactive iodine. If the thyroid has been removed, one way to raise TSH levels is to not take thyroid hormone pills for several weeks. This causes very low thyroid hormone levels (a condition known as hypothyroidism), which in turn causes the pituitary gland to release more TSH. This intentional hypothyroidism is temporary, but it often causes symptoms like tiredness, depression, weight gain, constipation, muscle aches, and reduced concentration. Another way to raise TSH levels before RAI therapy is to give an injectable form of thyrotropin (Thyrogen), which can make withholding thyroid hormone for a long period of time unnecessary. This drug is given daily for 2 days, with RAI given on the 3rd day.

Most doctors also recommend that the patient follow a low iodine diet for 1 or 2 weeks before treatment. This means avoiding foods that contain iodized salt and red dye #3, as well as dairy products, eggs, seafood, and soy.
Risks and side effects

Your body will give off radiation for some time after you get RAI therapy. Depending on the dose of radioiodine used and where you are being treated, you might need to be in the hospital for a few days after treatment, staying in a special isolation room to prevent others from being exposed to radiation. Some people may not need to be hospitalized. Once you are allowed to go home after treatment, you will be given instructions on how to protect others from radiation exposure and how long you need to take these precautions. These instructions may vary slightly by treatment center. Be sure you understand the instructions before you leave the hospital.

Short-term side effects of RAI treatment may include:

- Neck tenderness and swelling
- Nausea and vomiting
- Swelling and tenderness of the salivary glands
- Dry mouth
- Taste changes

Chewing gum or sucking on hard candy may help with salivary gland problems.

Radioiodine treatment also reduces tear formation in some people, leading to dry eyes. If you wear contact lenses, ask your doctor how long you should keep them out.

Men who receive large total doses because of many treatments with RAI may have lower sperm counts or, rarely, become infertile. Radioactive iodine may also affect a woman’s ovaries, and some women may have irregular periods for up to a year after treatment. Many doctors recommend that women avoid becoming pregnant for 6 months to a year after treatment. No ill effects have been noted in the children born to parents who received radioactive iodine in the past.

Both men and women who have had RAI therapy may have a slightly increased risk of developing leukemia in the future. Doctors disagree on exactly how much this risk is increased, but most of the largest studies have found that this is an extremely rare complication. Some research even suggests the risk of leukemia may not be significantly increased.

Talk to your health care team if you have any questions about the possible risks and benefits of your treatment.

- References
  See all references for Thyroid Cancer
Thyroid Hormone Therapy

Taking daily pills of thyroid hormone (thyroid hormone therapy) can serve 2 purposes:

- It can help maintain the body’s normal metabolism (by replacing missing thyroid hormone after surgery).
- It can help stop any remaining cancer cells from growing (by lowering TSH levels).

After a thyroidectomy, the body can no longer make the thyroid hormone it needs, so patients must take thyroid hormone (levothyroxine) pills to replace the loss of the natural hormone.

Taking thyroid hormone may also help prevent some thyroid cancers from returning. Normal thyroid function is regulated by the pituitary gland. The pituitary makes a hormone called TSH that causes the thyroid gland to make thyroid hormone for the body. TSH also promotes growth of the thyroid gland and probably of thyroid cancer cells. The level of TSH, in turn, is regulated by how much thyroid hormone is in the blood. If the level of thyroid hormone is low, the pituitary makes more TSH. If the level of thyroid hormone is high, not as much TSH is needed, so the pituitary makes less of it.

Doctors have learned that by giving higher than normal doses of thyroid hormone, TSH levels can be kept very low. This may slow the growth of any remaining cancer cells and lower the chance of some thyroid cancers (especially high-risk cancers) coming back.

Possible side effects

Taking higher than normal levels of thyroid hormone seems to have few short-term side effects, but some doctors have expressed concerns about taking them for long periods of time. High levels of thyroid hormone can lead to problems with a rapid or irregular heartbeat. Over the long run, high doses of thyroid hormone can lead to weak bones (osteoporosis). Because of this, high doses of thyroid hormone may be reserved for people with differentiated thyroid cancers who are at high risk of recurrence.
External Beam Radiation Therapy for Thyroid Cancer

External beam radiation therapy uses high-energy rays (or particles) to destroy cancer cells or slow their growth. A carefully focused beam of radiation is delivered from a machine outside the body. Generally, this type of radiation treatment is not used for cancers that take up iodine (that is, most differentiated thyroid cancers), which are better treated with radioiodine therapy. It is more often used as part of the treatment for medullary thyroid cancer and anaplastic thyroid cancer.

When a cancer that does not take up iodine has spread beyond the thyroid, external radiation treatment may help treat the cancer or reduce the chance of the disease coming back in the neck after surgery. If a cancer does not respond to radioiodine therapy, external radiation therapy may be used to treat local neck recurrence or distant metastases that are causing pain or other symptoms.

External beam radiation therapy is usually given 5 days a week for several weeks. Before your treatments start, the medical team will take careful measurements to find the correct angles for aiming the radiation beams and the proper dose of radiation. The treatment itself is painless and much like getting a regular x-ray. Each treatment lasts only a few minutes, although the setup time — getting you into place for treatment — usually takes longer.

Possible side effects

The main drawback of this treatment is that the radiation can destroy nearby healthy tissue along with the cancer cells. Some patients get skin changes similar to a sunburn, but this slowly fades away. Trouble swallowing, dry mouth, hoarseness, and fatigue are also potential side effects of external beam radiation therapy aimed at or near the
thyroid.

To reduce the risk of side effects, doctors carefully figure out the exact dose needed and aim the beam as accurately as they can to hit the target.

For more information see the Radiation Therapy section of our website,

- References
  See all references for Thyroid Cancer

Last Medical Review: March 31, 2016 Last Revised: April 15, 2016

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy.

Chemotherapy for Thyroid Cancer

Chemotherapy (chemo) uses anti-cancer drugs that are injected into a vein or muscle, or are taken by mouth. Chemotherapy is systemic therapy, which means that the drug enters the bloodstream and travels throughout the body to reach and destroy cancer cells.

Chemotherapy is seldom helpful for most types of thyroid cancer, but fortunately it is not needed in most cases. It is combined with external beam radiation therapy for anaplastic thyroid cancer and is sometimes used for other advanced cancers that no longer respond to other treatments.

Possible side effects

Chemo drugs attack cells that are dividing quickly, which is why they work against cancer cells. But other cells in the body, such as those in the bone marrow, the lining of the mouth and intestines, and the hair follicles, also divide quickly. These cells are also likely to be affected by chemotherapy, which can lead to side effects.

The side effects of chemotherapy depend on the type and dose of drugs given and the length of time they are taken. Common side effects of chemo include:

- Hair loss
- **Mouth sores**
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Nausea and vomiting**
- **Diarrhea**
- Increased chance of **infections** (from too few white blood cells)
- Easy bruising or bleeding (from too few low blood platelets)
- **Fatigue** (from too few low red blood cells)

These side effects are usually short-term and go away after treatment is finished. There are often ways to lessen these side effects. For example, drugs can be given to help prevent or reduce nausea and vomiting.

Some chemotherapy drugs may have other specific side effects that require monitoring. For example, doxorubicin (one of the most common chemo drugs used in thyroid cancer) can affect heart function. Therefore, a patient taking doxorubicin will get regular heart function tests like echocardiograms.

For more information see the [Chemotherapy](#) section on our website.

- **References**

See all references for Thyroid Cancer

Last Medical Review: March 31, 2016 Last Revised: April 15, 2016

---

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our [Content Usage Policy](#).

### Targeted Therapy for Thyroid Cancer

Researchers have begun to develop newer drugs that specifically target the changes inside cells that cause them to become cancerous. Unlike standard [chemotherapy](#) drugs, which work by attacking rapidly growing cells in general (including cancer cells), these drugs attack one or more specific targets on cancer cells.

### Targeted drugs for medullary thyroid cancer

Doctors have been especially interested in finding targeted drugs to treat medullary...
thyroid cancer (MTC) because thyroid hormone-based treatments (including radioactive iodine therapy) are not effective against these cancers.

**Vandetanib (Caprelsa)** is a targeted drug taken as a pill once a day. In patients with advanced MTC, vandetanib stops cancers from growing for an average of about 6 months, although it is not yet clear if it can help people live longer.

Some common side effects of vandetanib include diarrhea, rash, nausea, high blood pressure, headache, fatigue, decreased appetite, and belly (abdominal) pain. Rarely, it can also cause serious problems with heart rhythm and infection that can lead to death. Because of its potential side effects, doctors must get special training before they are allowed to prescribe this drug.

**Cabozantinib (Cometriq)** is another targeted drug used to treat MTC. It is taken in pill form once a day. In MTC patients, cabozantinib has been shown to help stop cancers from growing for about 7 months longer than a sugar pill. So far, though, it has not been shown to help patients live longer.

Common side effects include diarrhea, constipation, belly pain, mouth sores, decreased appetite, nausea, weight loss, fatigue, high blood pressure, loss of hair color, and hand-foot syndrome (redness, pain, and swelling of the hands and feet). Rarely, this drug can also cause serious side effects, such as severe bleeding and holes in the intestine.

**Targeted drugs for papillary or follicular thyroid cancer**

Fortunately, most of these cancers can be treated effectively with surgery and radioactive iodine therapy, so there is less need for other drugs to treat them. But for cancers in which these treatments aren’t effective, targeted drugs can be helpful.

**Sorafenib (Nexavar)** and **lenvatinib (Lenvima)** are targeted drugs known as kinase inhibitors. They work in 2 ways. They help block tumors from forming new blood vessels, which the tumors need to grow. These drugs also target some of the proteins made by cancer cells that normally help them grow.

These drugs can help stop cancer growth for a time when given to patients with differentiated thyroid cancer (papillary, follicular, and poorly differentiated thyroid cancers) whose cancers no longer respond to treatment with radioactive iodine. It isn’t yet clear if these drugs help patients live longer.
Both of these drugs are taken by mouth.

Common side effects include fatigue, rash, loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea, high blood pressure, and hand foot syndrome (redness, pain, swelling, or blisters on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet). Other side effects can also occur, some of which can be serious. Ask your doctor what you can expect.

**Targeted drugs for anaplastic thyroid cancer**

Doctors have been very interested in finding targeted drugs to treat anaplastic thyroid cancer because most other treatments are not very effective against these cancers.

Some anaplastic thyroid cancers have changes in the *BRAF* gene, which causes them to make proteins that help them grow.

**Dabrafenib (Tafinlar) and trametinib (Mekinist)** are drugs that target some of these proteins. These drugs can be used together to treat anaplastic thyroid cancers that have a certain type of *BRAF* gene change and that can’t be removed completely with surgery.

These drugs are taken as pills or capsules each day.

Common side effects can include skin changes, rash, itching, sensitivity to the sun, headache, fever, chills, joint or muscle pain, fatigue, cough, hair loss, nausea, diarrhea, and high blood pressure.

Less common but serious side effects can include bleeding, heart rhythm problems, liver or kidney problems, lung problems, severe allergic reactions, severe skin or eye problems, and increased blood sugar levels.

Some people treated with these drugs develop skin cancers, especially **squamous cell skin cancers**. Your doctor will want to check your skin often during treatment. You should also let your doctor know right away if you notice any new growths or abnormal areas on your skin.

For general information about targeted therapy, see [Targeted Therapy](#).

- References
- See all references for Thyroid Cancer

Last Medical Review: March 31, 2016 Last Revised: May 4, 2018
Treatment of Thyroid Cancer, by Type and Stage

The type of treatment your doctor will recommend depends on the type and stage of the cancer and on your overall health. This section discusses the typical treatment options for each type and stage of thyroid cancer, but your doctor may have reasons for suggesting a different treatment plan. Don't hesitate to ask him or her questions about your treatment options.

Papillary carcinoma and its variants

Most cancers are treated with removal of the thyroid gland (thyroidectomy), although small tumors that have not spread outside the thyroid gland may be treated by just removing the side of the thyroid containing the tumor (lobectomy). If lymph nodes are enlarged or show signs of cancer spread, they will be removed as well.

In addition, recent studies have suggested that patients with micro-papillary carcinomas (very small thyroid cancers) may safely choose to be managed by close observation with ongoing ultrasounds rather than have immediate surgery.

Even if the lymph nodes aren’t enlarged, some doctors recommend central compartment neck dissection (surgical removal of lymph nodes next to the thyroid) along with removal of the thyroid. Although this operation has not been shown to improve cancer survival, it might lower the risk of cancer coming back in the neck area. Because removing the lymph nodes allows them to be checked for cancer under the microscope, this surgery also makes it easier to accurately stage the cancer. If cancer has spread to other neck lymph nodes, a modified radical neck dissection (a more extensive removal of lymph nodes from the neck) is often done.

Treatment after surgery depends on the stage of the cancer.

Radioactive iodine (RAI) treatment is sometimes used after thyroidectomy for early stage cancers (T1 or T2, N0, M0), but the cure rate with surgery alone is excellent. If the cancer does come back, radioiodine treatment can still be given.
RAI therapy is often given for more advanced cancers such as T3 or T4 tumors, or cancers that have spread to lymph nodes or distant sites. The goal is to destroy any remaining thyroid tissue and to try to treat any cancer remaining in the body. Areas of distant spread that do not respond to RAI may need to be treated with external beam radiation therapy, targeted therapy, or chemotherapy.

People who have had a thyroidectomy will need to take daily thyroid hormone (levothyroxine) pills. If RAI treatment is planned, the start of thyroid hormone therapy may be delayed until the treatment is finished (usually about 6 weeks after surgery).

**Recurrent cancer:** Treatment of cancer that comes back after initial therapy depends mainly on where the cancer is, although other factors may be important as well. The recurrence may be found by either blood tests or imaging tests such as ultrasound or radiiodine scans.

If cancer comes back in the neck, an ultrasound-guided biopsy is done first to confirm that it is really cancer. Then, if the tumor appears to be resectable (removable), surgery is often used. If the cancer shows up on a radiiodine scan (meaning the cells are taking up iodine), radioactive iodine (RAI) therapy may be used, either alone or with surgery. If the cancer does not show up on the radiiodine scan but is found by other imaging tests such as an MRI or PET scan, external radiation may be used.

The targeted therapy drugs sorafenib (Nexavar) and lenvatinib (Lenvima) may be tried if the cancer has spread to several places and RAI and other treatments are not helpful, but doctors are still trying to find effective drugs for this disease. Because these cancers can be hard to treat, another option is taking part in a clinical trial of newer treatments.

### Follicular and Hürthle cell cancers

Often, it isn’t clear that a tumor is a follicular cancer based on a FNA biopsy. If the biopsy results are unclear, they might list “follicular neoplasm” as a diagnosis. Only about 2 of every 10 follicular neoplasms will actually turn out to be cancer, so the next step is usually surgery to remove the half of the thyroid gland that has the tumor (a lobectomy).

If the tumor turns out to be a follicular cancer, a second operation to remove the rest of the thyroid is usually needed (this is called a completion thyroidectomy). If the patient is only willing to have one operation, the doctor may just remove the whole thyroid gland in the first place. Still, for most patients, this isn’t really needed.

If there are signs the cancer has spread before surgery, the tumor must be a cancer
and so a thyroidectomy will be done.

Hürthle (Hurthle) cell carcinoma can also be hard to diagnose with certainty based on a FNA biopsy. Tumors suspected of being Hürthle cell carcinomas are often treated like follicular neoplasms. A lobectomy is usually done first. If the diagnosis is confirmed, a completion thyroidectomy is done. A thyroidectomy may be done as the first surgery if there are signs the cancer has spread or if the patient requests it to keep from having more surgery later.

As with papillary cancer, some lymph nodes usually are removed and examined. If cancer has spread to lymph nodes, a central compartment or modified neck dissection (surgical removal of lymph nodes from the neck) may be done. Because the thyroid is removed, patients will need to take thyroid hormone therapy as well, although it is often not started right away.

Radioiodine scanning is usually done after surgery to look for areas still taking up iodine. Spread to nearby lymph nodes and to distant sites that shows up on the scan can be treated by radioactive iodine (RAI). For cancers that don’t take up iodine, external beam radiation therapy may help treat the tumor or prevent it from growing back in the neck.

Distant metastases may need to be treated with external beam radiation therapy, or targeted therapy with sorafenib (Nexavar) or lenvatinib (Lenvima) if they do not respond to RAI. Another option is taking part in a clinical trial of newer treatments or chemotherapy

**Recurrent cancer:** Treatment of cancer that comes back after initial therapy depends mainly on where the cancer is, although other factors may be important as well. The recurrence may be found by either blood tests or imaging tests such as ultrasound or radioiodine scans.

If cancer comes back in the neck, an ultrasound-guided biopsy is first done to confirm that it is really cancer. Then, if the tumor appears to be resectable (removable), surgery is often used. If the cancer shows up on a radioiodine scan (meaning the cells are taking up iodine), radioactive iodine (RAI) therapy may be used, either alone or with surgery. If the cancer does not show up on the radioiodine scan but is found by other imaging tests such as an MRI or PET scan, external radiation may be used.

**Targeted therapy** with sorafenib (Nexavar) and lenvatinib (Lenvima) is tried first if the cancer has spread to several places and RAI was not helpful. Because these cancers can be hard to treat, another option is taking part in a clinical trial of newer treatments. If a clinical trial is not available your doctor may recommend chemotherapy.
Medullary thyroid carcinoma

Most doctors advise that patients diagnosed with medullary thyroid carcinoma (MTC) be tested for other tumors that are typically seen in patients with the MEN 2 syndromes (see Thyroid Cancer Risk Factors), such as pheochromocytoma and parathyroid tumors.

Screening for pheochromocytoma is particularly important, since the unknown presence of this tumor can make anesthesia and surgery extremely dangerous. If surgeons and anesthesiologists know about such tumors ahead of time, they can treat the patient with medicines before and during surgery to make surgery safe.

Stages I and II: Total thyroidectomy is the main treatment for MTC and often cures patients with stage I or stage II MTC. Nearby lymph nodes are usually removed as well (central compartment or modified radical neck dissection). Because the thyroid gland is removed, thyroid hormone therapy is needed after surgery. For MTC, thyroid hormone therapy is meant to provide enough hormone to keep the patient healthy, but it does not reduce the risk that the cancer will come back.

Because MTC cells do not take up radioactive iodine, there is no role for radioactive iodine therapy in treating MTC. Still, some doctors give a dose of radioactive iodine to destroy any remaining normal thyroid tissue. If MTC cells are in or near the thyroid, this may affect them as well.

Stages III and IV: Surgery is the same as for stages I and II (usually after screening for MEN 2 syndrome and pheochromocytoma). Thyroid hormone therapy is given afterward. When the tumor is extensive and invades many nearby tissues or cannot be completely removed, external beam radiation therapy may be given after surgery to try to reduce the chance of recurrence in the neck.

For cancers that have spread to distant parts of the body, surgery, radiation therapy, or similar treatments may be used if possible. If these treatments can’t be used, vandetanib (Caprelsa), cabozantinib (Cometriq), or other targeted drugs may be tried. Chemotherapy may be another option. Because these cancers can be hard to treat, another option is taking part in a clinical trial of newer treatments.

Recurrent cancer: If the cancer recurs in the neck or elsewhere, surgery, external radiation therapy, targeted therapy (such as vandetanib or cabozantinib), or chemotherapy may be needed. Clinical trials of new treatments may be another option if standard treatments aren’t effective.

Genetic testing in medullary thyroid cancer: If you are told that you have MTC, even
if you are the first one in the family to be diagnosed with this disease, ask your doctor about genetic counseling and testing. Genetic testing can find mutations in the RET gene, which is seen in cases of familial MTC and the MEN 2 syndromes.

If you have one of these mutations, it’s important that close family members (children, brothers, sisters, and parents) be tested as well. Because almost all children and adults with mutations in this gene will develop MTC at some time, most doctors agree anyone who has a RET gene mutation should have their thyroid removed to prevent MTC soon after getting the test results. This includes children, since some hereditary forms of MTC affect children and pre-teens. Total thyroidectomy can prevent this cancer in people with RET mutations who have not yet developed it. Of course, this means that lifelong thyroid hormone replacement will be needed.

**Anaplastic carcinoma**

Because this cancer is already widespread when it is diagnosed, surgery is often not helpful as treatment. If the cancer is confined to the area around the thyroid, which is rare, the entire thyroid and nearby lymph nodes may be removed. The goal of surgery is to remove as much cancer in the neck area as possible, ideally leaving no cancer tissue behind. Because of the way anaplastic carcinoma spreads, this is often difficult or impossible.

Radioactive iodine treatment does not work in this cancer and so is not used.

**External beam radiation therapy** may be used alone or combined with chemotherapy:

- To try to **shrink the cancer** before surgery to increase the chance of complete tumor removal
- After surgery to try to **control any disease that remains** in the neck
- When the tumor is **too large or widespread to be treated by surgery**

If the cancer is causing (or may eventually cause) trouble breathing, a hole may be placed surgically in the front of the neck and into the windpipe to bypass the tumor and allow the patient to breathe more comfortably. This hole is called a tracheostomy.

For cancers that have spread, chemotherapy can be used, sometimes along with radiation therapy if the cancer is not too widespread. If the cancer cells have certain changes in the BRAF gene, treatment with the targeted drugs dabrafenib (Tafinlar) and trametinib (Mekinist) is another option.

Because these cancers can be hard to treat, **clinical trials** of newer treatments are an option as well.