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# Signs and Symptoms of Cancer

## What are signs and symptoms?

Signs and symptoms are both signals of injury, illness, disease – signals that something is not right in the body.

A *sign* is a signal that can be seen by someone else – maybe a loved one, or a doctor, nurse, or other health care professional. For example, fever, fast breathing, and abnormal lung sounds heard through a stethoscope may be signs of pneumonia.

A *symptom* is a signal that's felt or noticed by the person who has it, but may not be easily seen by anyone else. For example, weakness, aching, and feeling short of breath may be symptoms of pneumonia.

Having one sign or symptom may not be enough to figure out what's causing it. For example, a rash in a child could be a sign of a number of things, such as poison ivy, measles, a skin infection, or a food allergy. But if the child has the rash along with other signs and symptoms like a high fever, chills, achiness, and a sore throat, then a doctor can get a better picture of the illness. Sometimes, a patient's signs and symptoms still don't give the doctor enough clues to be sure what's causing the illness. Then [medical tests](#)<sup>1</sup>, such as x-rays, blood tests, or a biopsy may be needed.

## How does cancer cause signs and symptoms?

Cancer is a group of diseases that can cause almost any sign or symptom. The signs and symptoms will depend on where the cancer is, how big it is, and how much it affects the organs or tissues. If a cancer has spread (*metastasized*), signs or symptoms may appear in different parts of the body.

As a cancer grows, it can begin to push on nearby organs, blood vessels, and nerves. This pressure causes some of the signs and symptoms of cancer. If the cancer is in a critical area, such as certain parts of the brain, even the smallest tumor can cause symptoms.

But sometimes cancer starts in places where it won't cause any signs or symptoms until it has grown quite large. Cancers of the pancreas, for example, usually don't cause symptoms until they grow large enough to press on nearby nerves or organs (this causes back or belly pain). Others may grow around the bile duct and block the flow of bile. This causes the eyes and skin to look yellow (*jaundice*). By the time a pancreatic cancer causes signs or symptoms like these, it's usually in an advanced stage. This means it has grown and spread beyond the place it started – the pancreas.

A cancer may also cause symptoms like fever, extreme tiredness (*fatigue*), or weight loss. This may be because cancer cells use up much of the body's energy supply, or they may release substances that change the way the body makes energy from food. Cancer can also cause the immune system to react in ways that produce these signs and symptoms.

Sometimes, cancer cells release substances into the bloodstream that cause symptoms that are not usually linked to cancer. For example, some cancers of the pancreas can release substances that cause blood clots in veins of the legs. Some lung cancers make hormone-like substances that raise blood calcium levels. This affects nerves and muscles, making the person feel weak and dizzy.

## How are signs and symptoms helpful?

Treatment works best when cancer is found early – while it's still small and is less likely to have spread to other parts of the body. This often means a better chance for a cure, especially if the cancer can be removed with surgery.

A good example of the importance of finding cancer early is melanoma skin cancer. It can be easy to remove if it has not grown deep into the skin. The *5-year survival rate* (percentage of people who live at least 5 years after diagnosis) at this early stage is around 98%. Once melanoma has spread to other parts of the body, the 5-year survival rate drops to about 16%.

Sometimes people ignore symptoms. Maybe they don't know that the symptoms could mean something is wrong. Or they might be frightened by what the symptoms could mean and don't want to get medical help. Maybe they just can't afford to get medical care.

Some symptoms, such as tiredness or coughing, are more likely caused by something other than cancer. Symptoms can seem unimportant, especially if there's a clear cause or the problem only lasts a short time. In the same way, a person may reason that a symptom like a breast lump is probably a cyst that will go away by itself. But no symptom should be ignored or overlooked, especially if it has lasted a long time or is getting worse.

Most likely, symptoms are not caused by cancer, but it's important to have them checked out, just in case. If cancer is not the cause, a doctor can help figure out what the cause is and treat it, if needed.

Sometimes, it's possible to find cancer before having symptoms. The American Cancer Society and other health groups recommend cancer-related check-ups and certain tests for people even though they have no symptoms. This helps find certain cancers early, before symptoms start. For more information on early detection tests, see our document called [American Cancer Society Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cancer](#)<sup>2</sup>. But keep in mind, even if you have these recommended tests, it's still important to see a doctor if you have any symptoms.

## What are some general signs and symptoms of cancer?

You should know some of the general signs and symptoms of cancer. But remember, having any of these does not mean that you have cancer – many other things cause these signs and symptoms, too. If you have any of these symptoms and they last for a long time or get worse, please see a doctor to find out what's going on.

### Unexplained weight loss

Most people with cancer will lose weight at some point. When you lose weight for no known reason, it's called an *unexplained weight loss*. An unexplained weight loss of 10 pounds or more may be the first sign of cancer. This happens most often with cancers of the [pancreas](#)<sup>3</sup>, [stomach](#)<sup>4</sup>, [esophagus](#)<sup>5</sup> (swallowing tube), or [lung](#)<sup>6</sup>.

### Fever

Fever is very common with cancer, but it more often happens after cancer has spread from where it started. Almost all people with cancer will have fever at some time, especially if the cancer or its treatment affects the immune system. (This can make it harder for the body to fight infection.) Less often, fever may be an early sign of cancer, such as blood cancers like [leukemia](#)<sup>7</sup> or [lymphoma](#)<sup>8</sup>.

## Fatigue

Fatigue is extreme tiredness that doesn't get better with rest. It may be an important symptom as cancer grows. But it may happen early in some cancers, like [leukemia](#)<sup>9</sup>. Some [colon](#)<sup>10</sup> or [stomach](#)<sup>11</sup> cancers can cause blood loss that's not obvious. This is another way cancer can cause fatigue.

## Pain

Pain may be an early symptom with some cancers like [bone cancers](#)<sup>12</sup> or [testicular cancer](#)<sup>13</sup>. A headache that does not go away or get better with treatment may be a symptom of a [brain tumor](#)<sup>14</sup>. Back pain can be a symptom of cancer of the [colon, rectum](#)<sup>15</sup>, or [ovary](#)<sup>16</sup>. Most often, pain due to cancer means it has already spread (metastasized) from where it started.

## Skin changes

Along with [skin cancers](#)<sup>17</sup>, some other cancers can cause skin changes that can be seen. These signs and symptoms include:

- Darker looking skin (*hyperpigmentation*)
- Yellowish skin and eyes (*jaundice*)
- Reddened skin (*erythema*)
- Itching (*pruritus*)
- Excessive hair growth

## Signs and symptoms of certain cancers

Along with the general symptoms, you should watch for certain other common signs and symptoms that could suggest cancer. Again, there may be other causes for each of these, but it's important to see a doctor about them as soon as possible – especially if there's no other cause you can identify, the problem lasts a long time, or it gets worse over time.

### Change in bowel habits or bladder function

Long-term constipation, diarrhea, or a change in the size of the stool may be a sign of [colon cancer](#)<sup>18</sup>. Pain when passing urine, blood in the urine, or a change in bladder function (such as needing to pass urine more or less often than usual) could be related

to [bladder](#)<sup>19</sup> or [prostate](#)<sup>20</sup> cancer. Report any changes in bladder or bowel function to a doctor.

### **Sores that do not heal**

[Skin cancers](#)<sup>21</sup> may bleed and look like sores that don't heal. A long-lasting sore in the mouth could be an [oral cancer](#)<sup>22</sup>. This should be dealt with right away, especially in people who smoke, chew tobacco, or often drink alcohol. Sores on the penis or vagina may either be signs of infection or an early cancer, and should be seen by a health professional.

### **White patches inside the mouth or white spots on the tongue**

White patches inside the mouth and white spots on the tongue may be *leukoplakia*. Leukoplakia is a pre-cancerous area that's caused by frequent irritation. It's often caused by smoking or other tobacco use. People who smoke pipes or use oral or spit tobacco are at high risk for leukoplakia. If it's not treated, leukoplakia can become [mouth cancer](#)<sup>23</sup>. Any long-lasting mouth changes should be checked by a doctor or dentist right away.

### **Unusual bleeding or discharge**

Unusual bleeding can happen in early or advanced cancer. Coughing up blood may be a sign of [lung cancer](#)<sup>24</sup>. Blood in the stool (which can look like very dark or black stool) could be a sign of [colon or rectal cancer](#)<sup>25</sup>. Cancer of the [cervix](#)<sup>26</sup> or the [endometrium](#)<sup>27</sup> (lining of the uterus) can cause abnormal vaginal bleeding. Blood in the urine may be a sign of [bladder](#)<sup>28</sup> or [kidney](#)<sup>29</sup> cancer. A bloody discharge from the nipple may be a sign of [breast cancer](#)<sup>30</sup>.

### **Thickening or lump in the breast or other parts of the body**

Many cancers can be felt through the skin. These cancers occur mostly in the [breast](#)<sup>31</sup>, [testicle](#)<sup>32</sup>, lymph nodes (glands), and the soft tissues of the body. A lump or thickening may be an early or late sign of cancer and should be reported to a doctor, especially if you've just found it or notice it has grown in size. Keep in mind that some breast cancers show up as red or thickened skin rather than a lump.

### **Indigestion or trouble swallowing**

Indigestion or swallowing problems that don't go away may be signs of cancer of the [esophagus](#)<sup>33</sup> (the swallowing tube that goes to the stomach), [stomach](#)<sup>34</sup>, or [pharynx](#)<sup>35</sup>

(throat). But like most symptoms on this list, they are most often caused by something other than cancer.

### Recent change in a wart or mole or any new skin change

Any wart, mole, or freckle that changes color, size, or shape, or that loses its sharp border should be seen by a doctor right away. Any other skin changes should be reported, too. A skin change may be a [melanoma](#)<sup>36</sup> which, if found early, can be treated successfully. See pictures of skin cancers and other skin conditions in our [Skin Cancer Image Gallery](#)<sup>37</sup>.

### Nagging cough or hoarseness

A cough that does not go away may be a sign of [lung cancer](#)<sup>38</sup>. Hoarseness can be a sign of cancer of the *larynx* ([voice box](#)<sup>39</sup>) or [thyroid gland](#)<sup>40</sup>.

### Other symptoms

The signs and symptoms listed above are the more common ones seen with cancer, but there are many others that are not listed here. If you notice any major changes in the way your body works or the way you feel – especially if it lasts for a long time or gets worse – let a doctor know. If it has nothing to do with cancer, the doctor can find out more about what's going on and, if needed, treat it. If it is cancer, you'll give yourself the chance to have it treated early, when treatment works best.

### Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/healthy/find-cancer-early/cancer-screening-guidelines.html](http://www.cancer.org/healthy/find-cancer-early/cancer-screening-guidelines.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/pancreatic-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/pancreatic-cancer.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/esophagus-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/esophagus-cancer.html)
6. [www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html)
7. [www.cancer.org/cancer/leukemia.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/leukemia.html)
8. [www.cancer.org/cancer/lymphoma.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/lymphoma.html)
9. [www.cancer.org/cancer/leukemia.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/leukemia.html)
10. [www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html)
11. [www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html)
12. [www.cancer.org/cancer/bone-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/bone-cancer.html)

13. [www.cancer.org/cancer/testicular-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/testicular-cancer.html)
14. [www.cancer.org/cancer/brain-spinal-cord-tumors-adults.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/brain-spinal-cord-tumors-adults.html)
15. [www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html)
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18. [www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html)
19. [www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer.html)
20. [www.cancer.org/cancer/prostate-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/prostate-cancer.html)
21. [www.cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer.html)
22. [www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html)
23. [www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer.html)
24. [www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html)
25. [www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer.html)
26. [www.cancer.org/cancer/cervical-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cervical-cancer.html)
27. [www.cancer.org/cancer/endometrial-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/endometrial-cancer.html)
28. [www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/bladder-cancer.html)
29. [www.cancer.org/cancer/kidney-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/kidney-cancer.html)
30. [www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html)
31. [www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html)
32. [www.cancer.org/cancer/testicular-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/testicular-cancer.html)
33. [www.cancer.org/cancer/esophagus-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/esophagus-cancer.html)
34. [www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/stomach-cancer.html)
35. [www.cancer.org/cancer/laryngeal-and-hypopharyngeal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/laryngeal-and-hypopharyngeal-cancer.html)
36. [www.cancer.org/cancer/melanoma-skin-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/melanoma-skin-cancer.html)
37. [www.cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer/skin-cancer-image-gallery.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer/skin-cancer-image-gallery.html)
38. [www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer.html)
39. [www.cancer.org/cancer/laryngeal-and-hypopharyngeal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/laryngeal-and-hypopharyngeal-cancer.html)
40. [www.cancer.org/cancer/thyroid-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/thyroid-cancer.html)
41. <http://www.cancercare.org/>
42. <http://www.cancer.gov/>

## Additional Resources

### Other organizations and websites\*

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

**CancerCare** Toll-free number: 1-800-813-4673 Website: [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)  
(<http://www.cancercare.org/>)<sup>41</sup>

- Offers cancer information, workshops, and support to people with cancer, caregivers, and loved ones; all services also available in Spanish

**National Cancer Institute (NCI)** Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER)  
TTY: 1-800-332-8615 Website: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) (<http://www.cancer.gov/>)<sup>42</sup>

- Provides accurate, up-to-date cancer information to patients, their families, and the general public.

*\*Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for cancer-related information and support. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit [www.cancer.org \(#/cancer/cancer-basics/signs-and-symptoms-of-cancer\)](http://www.cancer.org/#/cancer/cancer-basics/signs-and-symptoms-of-cancer).

Last Medical Review: August 11, 2014 Last Revised: August 11, 2014

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