



# After a Brain or Spinal Cord Tumor Diagnosis



Brain and spinal cord tumors are masses of abnormal cells inside the brain or spine. They can make it hard for the nerves of the brain and spinal cord to work normally to control how the rest of the body functions. If you have been told you have a brain or spinal cord tumor, you've probably already had scans and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have other procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of brain or spinal cord tumor you have, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

## Types of brain or spinal cord tumors

These tumors are named for the part of the brain or spinal cord where the tumor formed. Not all of them are cancer; some are benign or not cancer. Some of them are mixed types. Common types are:

- Astrocytoma
- Oligodendroglioma
- Ependymoma
- Meningioma
- Medulloblastoma
- Schwannoma or neurilemmoma

## Treatment for brain or spinal cord tumors

Brain and spinal cord tumors can often be hard to treat. Your treatment will depend on what type of tumor you have, where it is, how big it is, and its grade (how quickly they grow and spread). Your treatment options will also depend on the results of tests on the cancer cells, your health, and your personal preferences.

Surgery is the first treatment for most people with a brain or spinal cord tumor. The type of surgery used depends on the tumor type, where it is, and how big it is.

If the tumor is benign, surgery may be the only treatment needed. If other treatment is needed, they can include radiation, chemo and targeted therapy, and tumor treating fields (TTFields) or electric field therapy. You may need more than one type of treatment. Several treatments can be used to help prevent or relieve symptoms of brain and spinal cord tumors. Sometimes, they are given along with other treatments. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

## Be sure to ask:

- What type of tumor do I have?
- Where is the tumor?
- How big is the tumor? How fast is it likely to grow?
- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- Will treatment include surgery?
- Can all of the tumor be removed? If not, why?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- Do I need to shave my head?

## What to expect before and during treatment

Your cancer care team will explain your treatment plan to you. This team may include different doctors, nurses, and other health care workers, depending on the type of treatment you need. For example, if you need radiation, you will work with a radiation oncologist to know what to expect before, during, and after treatment. If you need other types of treatment, your cancer care team will explain how it is given, help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you with any side effects. You might also get blood tests, scans, or other tests at certain times to see how well your treatment is working.

Not everyone going through treatment for a brain or spinal cord tumor will have the same side effects. For example, a person may get only radiation if surgery can't be done. The side effects of this treatment are different from the side effects of surgery, chemo, or targeted therapy. And people getting the same treatment might have different side effects.

### Be sure to ask:

- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Are there any clinical trials that might be right for me?

## What to expect after treatment

After treatment, ask your cancer doctor for a treatment summary and follow-up plan. This is called a survivorship care plan. Your cancer doctor will work with your family or primary care doctor to help manage side effects from treatment and check your general health. You will have regular tests to check if your cancer has come back or if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body.

You might be faced with changes to your body after treatment. You might have scars if you've had surgery. You might also have hair loss. Some treatments may cause problems with how your brain works. Be sure to ask the doctor what to expect, and let them know if you have any problems.

People who have had a brain or spinal cord tumor are at risk of having it again or getting certain other types of cancer. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it's important to ask your cancer care team about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your cancer has come back.

For some people, the cancer might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will still be needed to see how well it's working.

### Be sure to ask:

- Where do I get a copy of my treatment summary and follow-up plan?
- How often do I need to see my cancer care team?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Will I need tests to see if my tumor has come back, or to check for problems from my treatment?
- Do I need any screening tests, like a mammogram or colonoscopy, to find other cancers early?
- Are there late or long-term side effects from treatment that I should watch for?
- Where can I find my medical records after treatment?

## Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your cancer care team if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms.

There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. Not smoking may help lower your chance of getting another cancer. Getting to and staying at a healthy weight, eating well, being active, and avoiding alcohol can also help you stay healthy and may lower your risk of getting other cancers.

Certain conditions that increase a person's risk for brain and spinal cord tumors can run in families. Sometimes genetic testing is done to know if you have a type that might be inherited. Talk to your cancer care team to find out if genetic testing is right for you.

## Dealing with your feelings

Having a brain or spinal cord tumor might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them.

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about them, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your cancer care team know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, continue doing things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling can also help. Some people find it helpful to talk with others who've been through the same things. A support group can offer that. Tell your cancer care team how you're feeling. They can help you find the right support.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org/brainspinaltumor](https://cancer.org/brainspinaltumor) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.