



# After an Anal Cancer Diagnosis



Anal cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the anus. The anus is the opening that connects the intestines to the outside of the body. If you have been told you have anal cancer, you've probably already had exams, imaging tests like a CT scan, an endoscopy, and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). You might also have other procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of anal cancer you have, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

## Treatment for anal cancer

Your treatment will depend on the type and stage of the anal cancer. Your treatment options will also depend on the results of tests on the cancer cells, your health, and your personal preferences.

There are many ways to treat anal cancer. Often the best approach combines two or more treatments.

In the past, surgery was the only way to cure anal cancer, but now most anal cancers are treated with a combination of radiation and chemotherapy (chemo). Surgery is often not needed.

Immunotherapy may also be used. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

If other treatments don't work, surgery may be needed to remove the anus and the anal sphincter (the ring-like muscle that controls bowel movements). After surgery, a person will need an ostomy. An ostomy is an opening in the belly that allows stool to pass out of the body.

## Be sure to ask:

- What type of anal cancer do I have?
- What stage is the anal cancer, and what does that mean?
- Will I need more tests?
- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- Will treatment include surgery? Can all the cancer be removed?
- Will I need an ostomy?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?

## 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 anal cancer will have the same side effects. For example, the side effects of radiation are different from the side effects of chemo, immunotherapy, and surgery. 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 last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- How will treatment affect my daily life?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Will treatment affect my sex life? How and for how long? What can I do help this?
- 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. Be sure to ask the doctor what to expect, and let them know if you have any problems.

People who have had anal cancer 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 anal 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 cancer 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 doctor or 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 reduce your chances of a new anal cancer, as well as getting other cancers. Getting to and staying at a healthy weight, eating well, being active, and avoiding alcohol can also help you stay healthy and lower your risk of other cancers. These may also lower your risk of a new anal cancer, but more research is needed.

## Dealing with your feelings

Having anal cancer 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/analcancer](https://cancer.org/analcancer) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.