Cancer starts when normal cells are damaged. Normal cells die when they are damaged, but cancer cells keep on making new cells. As the cancer grows out of control, it can crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Cancer cells can also break away from the site where the cancer started (metastasis). These cells can travel to other parts of the body and end up in the lymph nodes or other body organs, causing problems with normal functions.

For many people, cancer can be treated successfully. In fact, more people than ever before lead full lives after cancer treatment.

**Cancer is more than just one disease.**

There are many types of cancer. Cancer can start anywhere in the body and is named for the part of the body or tissue where it began. For instance, cancer that starts in the breast is called breast cancer. Even if it spreads to other parts of the body, it is still called breast cancer.

Cancers are alike in some ways, but they can be different in the ways they grow, spread, and respond to treatment. Some cancers grow and spread fast. Others grow more slowly. Some are more likely to spread to other parts of the body. Others tend to stay where they started.

Cancers also respond to treatment in different ways. Some types of cancer are best treated with surgery; others respond better to drugs such as chemotherapy. Often, 2 or more treatments are used to get the best results.

**What is a tumor?**

A tumor is a lump or growth. Some lumps are cancer, but many are not. Lumps that are not cancer are called benign. Lumps that are cancer are called malignant. What makes these tumors different is that cancer tumors can spread to other parts of the body, while benign tumors do not.

**What causes cancer?**

Cancer can have many possible causes. Lifestyle habits, genes you get from your parents, and being exposed to cancer-causing agents in the environment can all play a role. And many times, there is no obvious cause.
What does cancer stage mean?

When a cancer is found, tests are done to see how big the cancer is and whether it has spread from where it started. This is called the cancer’s stage. A lower stage (such as stage 1 or 2) means that the cancer has not spread very much. A higher number (such as stage 3 or 4) means it has spread more. Stage 4 is the highest stage.

The stage of the cancer is very important when choosing the best treatment for a person. Ask your doctor about your cancer’s stage and what it means for you.

How is cancer treated?

Common treatments for cancer include using surgery, medicines (drugs), and radiation. Sometimes more than one type of treatment is used, depending on the type and stage of cancer.

Surgery can be used to remove part or all of the cancer. Surgery may be done as the only treatment if a cancer is just in one place, or it may be used along with other treatments if the cancer has spread.

Radiation may be used to kill or slow the growth of cancer cells. Most radiation treatment is like getting an x-ray. Other times it’s given by putting a radioactive “seed” inside the cancer to give off the radiation.

Many times, medicines are used to kill cancer cells or slow their growth. Some of these medicines are given into a vein through a needle (IV), and others are a pill you swallow. Each medicine works differently, and sometimes one or more are used together to treat a cancer. The different kinds of medicines used to treat cancer are chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, and hormone therapy.

What is the best treatment for me?

Each person’s treatment is based on their type of cancer, how big the cancer is, and whether it has spread to other parts of the body. Treatment is also based on results from tests on the cancer cells, other health problems a person has, and what is important to the person. The cancer care team also looks at treatment guidelines from experts to see what is most likely to work.

Not all types of treatment will work for your cancer, so ask what options you have. And treatments do have side effects, so ask about what to expect with each treatment. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. It’s your right to know what treatments are most likely to help and what their side effects may be.

If you have questions about cancer or need help finding resources in your area, please call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345. We’re here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.