

When the Doctor Says “Cancer”

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease that happens when cells in your body change and grow out of control. Healthy cells have a certain structure, function, and a normal life span. They grow by dividing in a controlled process called mitosis. Cancer cells are not normal. They divide faster and without control. Without treatment, they can grow, spread, and cause health problems and even death.

There are more than 100 types of cancer, so learning what type you have is important. You might want to ask your doctor to spell out the name of your cancer. You may write it in the box on this page or ask your doctor or nurse to write it down.

Your doctor can also tell you its stage and grade. Knowing the stage and grade can help you and your doctor choose the best treatment plan and make other decisions together.

Stage of cancer

“Stage” is one way to measure cancer. Doctors give many types of cancer a number from 1 to 4. This is called the stage number. It is based on many factors, such as where the cancer is located in the body, how big it is, if it has spread and how much, and if there is more than 1 tumor.

Grade of cancer

“Grade” is another way to measure cancer. It describes how much the cancer cells look like healthy cells under a microscope. Like the stage, doctors usually use a number from 1 to 4. Cancer cells that look a lot like healthy cells have a lower number, or grade, than cells that look very abnormal. A lower grade means the cancer is less likely to grow and spread quickly. Cells that look very different from healthy cells are more likely to grow and spread quickly.

How is cancer treated?

Most cancers are treated with surgery, a high-energy treatment called radiation therapy, or medications that treat the whole body to kill cancer cells. These medications include chemotherapy, targeted therapy, hormone therapy, and immunotherapy. You might have a combination of surgery, radiation therapy, and medications. You may also receive your treatment as part of a research study, called a clinical trial, if you agree to join.

Every cancer treatment can cause side effects. Treatment to relieve side effects is an important part of your cancer treatment plan. You might hear this treatment called “supportive care” or “palliative care.”

How can I cope with having cancer?

Staying organized and getting support are important. You can use a notebook, file folder, or mobile app to keep health information in one place and share it with people involved in your care. This is especially important when you are upset, confused, or not feeling well.

Ask to speak to a counselor, social worker, patient navigator, or another health care professional to get answers to questions about insurance and finances, emotional support, and help with daily activities. Getting support will help you and your loved ones cope with the diagnosis and treatment. Find more information at www.cancer.net/coping.

The type of cancer is: _____

The stage and grade is: _____

Notes: _____

Questions to ask the health care team

It is normal to have many questions about cancer. Ask all the questions you have, even if they do not seem related to cancer. You might want to write them down for the next appointment or phone call. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes.

- What type of cancer do I have?
- What is the stage and grade?
- What are the usual types of treatment for this type of cancer? Do you think those are the best options for me, or would something different work better? Why?
- Is there a clinical trial available for me?
- Is the goal of each treatment to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my health care team? What does each person do? How do I contact them?
- Will my insurance cover my cancer treatment? Who can help me find out?
- How soon do I need to start treatment, and why? How long do you expect it to take?
- What side effects can I expect? Who can help with controlling or preventing side effects?
- Will I be able to work during treatment? Will I need to take time off or get help at home?
- How will the treatment affect my ability to have sex? To have children?
- Will the treatment cause long-term, or lifelong, effects?
- Who can I talk to about having cancer? Is there a support group or counselor available?
- Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

Find more questions to ask your health care team at www.cancer.net/questions. You can also download Cancer.Net's free app at www.cancer.net/app. Find pictures of the parts of the body that cancer affects at www.cancer.net/illustrations.

The ideas and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) or ASCO's Conquer Cancer Foundation. The information in this fact sheet is not intended as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed health care provider. Patients with health care-related questions should call or see their physician or other health care provider promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered here. The mention of any product, service, or treatment in this fact sheet should not be construed as an ASCO endorsement. ASCO is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of or related to any use of ASCO's patient education materials, or to any errors or omissions.

Health Care Professionals: To order more printed copies, please call 888-273-3508 or visit www.cancer.net/estore.

Cancer.Net

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY

2318 Mill Road, Suite 800, Alexandria, VA 22314 | Toll Free: 888-651-3038 | Phone: 571-483-1300
www.asco.org | www.cancer.net | www.conquer.org
© 2019 American Society of Clinical Oncology. For permissions information, contact permissions@asco.org.

WORDS TO KNOW

Biopsy:

A sample of tissue that is taken from your body to check for cancer cells.

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells, usually by keeping them from growing.

Clinical trials:

Research studies that use human volunteers to test new medications and other treatments. Clinical trial treatments are safe enough to study, but not yet available to the public.

Hormone therapy:

Treatment that removes, blocks, or adds hormones to destroy or slow the growth of cancer cells.

Immunotherapy:

Treatment designed to help fight the cancer by boosting the body's natural defenses.

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery.

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

Supportive care:

Care that relieves side effects and helps patients feel better during illness and treatment. Also called "palliative care."

Surgery:

Removing diseased or damaged tissue from the body during an operation.

Targeted therapy:

Treatment designed to fight specific genes or proteins that allow the cancer to grow and survive.

Side effects:

Problems or feelings that a medicine or other treatment causes. For example, nausea can be a side effect of chemotherapy.

MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH

CONQUER CANCER®
THE ASCO FOUNDATION