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Anal Cancer - Diagnosis [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 03/2016

ON THIS PAGE: You will find a list of common tests, procedures, and scans that doctors use to find the cause of a medical problem. To see other pages, use the menu.

Doctors use many tests to find, or diagnose, cancer. They also do tests to learn if cancer has spread to another part of the body from where it started. If this happens, it is called metastasis. For example, imaging tests can show if the cancer has spread. Imaging tests show pictures of the inside of the body. Doctors may also do tests to learn which treatments could work best.

For most types of cancer, a biopsy is the only sure way for the doctor to know whether an area of the body has cancer. In a biopsy, the doctor takes a small sample of tissue for testing in a laboratory. If a biopsy is not possible, the doctor may suggest other tests that will help make a diagnosis.

If a biopsy is not possible, the doctor may suggest other tests that will help make a diagnosis. Imaging tests may be used to find out whether the cancer has spread.

This list describes options for diagnosing this type of cancer. Not all tests listed will be used for every person. Your doctor may consider these factors when choosing a diagnostic test:

- The type of cancer suspected
- Your signs and symptoms

- Your age and medical condition
- The results of earlier medical tests

In addition to a physical examination, the following tests may be used to diagnose anal cancer:

- **Digital rectal examination (DRE).** During this test, the doctor inserts a gloved finger into the anus to feel for lumps or other abnormalities. General cancer guidelines suggest men have a [DRE](#) [3] annually after the age of 50 and women have one during routine pelvic examinations. If you are at higher risk for developing anal cancer, your doctor may perform a DRE more often.
- **Anoscopy.** If the doctor feels a suspicious area during a DRE, this [endoscopic test](#) [4] may be performed to take a closer look at the area. An anoscopy allows the doctor to see inside the body with a thin, lighted, flexible tube called an anoscope. Similarly, a proctoscope can be used to view the rectum in a procedure called a proctoscopy. The person may be sedated as the tube is inserted into the anus and/or rectum.
- **Biopsy.** A [biopsy](#) [5] is the removal of a small amount of tissue for examination under a microscope. Other tests can suggest that cancer is present, but only a biopsy can make a definite diagnosis. A pathologist then analyzes the sample(s). A pathologist is a doctor who specializes in interpreting laboratory tests and evaluating cells, tissues, and organs to diagnose disease. The type of biopsy performed will depend on the location of the tumor. For instance, an excisional biopsy can remove the entire lump if the lump is small and has not grown into other tissues. Lymph nodes may also be removed and examined in a biopsy.
- **Ultrasound.** An [ultrasound](#) [6] uses sound waves to create a picture of the internal organs. In an anal ultrasound, an ultrasound wand is inserted into the anus to get the pictures.
- **X-ray.** An x-ray is way to create a picture of the structures inside of the body using a small amount of radiation.
- **Computed tomography (CT or CAT) scan.** A [CT scan](#) [7] creates a 3-dimensional picture of the inside of the body using x-rays taken from different angles. A computer then combines these images into a detailed, cross-sectional view that shows any abnormalities or tumors. A CT scan can also be used to measure the tumor's size. Sometimes, a special

dye called a contrast medium is given before the scan to provide better detail on the image. This dye can be injected into a patient's vein or given as a pill to swallow.

- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).** An [MRI](#) [8] uses magnetic fields, not x-rays, to produce detailed images of the body. A special dye called a contrast medium is given before the scan to create a clearer picture. This dye can be injected into a patient's vein or given as a pill to swallow.
- **Positron emission tomography (PET) scan.** A PET scan is usually combined with a CT scan (see above), called a [PET-CT scan](#) [9]. However, you may hear your doctor refer to this procedure just as a PET scan. A PET scan is a way to create pictures of organs and tissues inside the body. A small amount of a radioactive sugar substance is injected into the patient's body. This sugar substance is taken up by cells that use the most energy. Because cancer tends to use energy actively, it absorbs more of the radioactive substance. A scanner then detects this substance to produce images of the inside of the body.

After diagnostic tests are done, your doctor will review all of the results with you. If the diagnosis is cancer, these results also help the doctor describe the cancer; this is called staging.

The [next section in this guide is Stages and Grades](#) [10]. It explains the system doctors use to describe the extent of the disease. Or, use the menu to choose another section to continue reading this guide.

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/anal-cancer/diagnosis>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24500>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24511>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24406>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24714>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24486>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24578>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24565>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18467>