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Vulvar Cancer - Diagnosis [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 08/2015

ON THIS PAGE: You will find a list of the common tests, procedures, and scans that doctors can use to find out what's wrong and identify the cause of the problem. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Doctors use many tests to diagnose cancer and find out if it has spread to another part of the body, called metastasis. Some tests may also determine which treatments may be the most effective. For most types of cancer, a biopsy is the only way to make a definitive diagnosis of cancer.

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.

Your doctor may consider these factors when choosing a diagnostic test:

- Age and medical condition
- Type of cancer suspected
- Signs and symptoms
- Previous test results

In addition to a physical examination, the following tests may be used to diagnose vulvar cancer. Not all tests listed will be used for every person.

- **Pelvic examination.** The doctor feels the uterus, vagina, ovaries, fallopian tubes, bladder, and rectum to check for any unusual changes.
- **Biopsy** [3]. A biopsy 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. The sample removed during the biopsy is analyzed by a pathologist. 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 suspicious tissue.

If the biopsy indicates that cervical cancer is present, the doctor will refer the woman to a gynecologic oncologist, who specializes in treating this type of cancer.

- **Lymph node sampling.** The lymph nodes are tiny, bean-shaped organs that help fight infection. To determine whether a cancer has spread, it may be necessary to remove lymph nodes for a biopsy. The procedure for determining if cancer has spread to the lymph nodes is the sentinel lymph node biopsy. In this procedure, the first, or sentinel, lymph node is sampled. Recent research has shown that if the first lymph node is free of cancer, then the cancer most likely has not spread.
- **X-ray.** An x-ray is a way to create a picture of the structures inside of the body using a small amount of radiation.
- **Endoscopy** [4]. This test allows the doctor to see inside the body with a thin, lighted, flexible tube called an endoscope. The woman may be sedated as the tube is inserted through the mouth, anus, vagina, urethra, or a small surgical opening. Sedation is giving medication to become more relaxed, calm, or sleepy.
- **Computed tomography (CT or CAT) scan** [5]. A CT scan creates a three-dimensional picture of the inside of the body with an x-ray machine. 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 \(MRI\)](#)** [6]. An MRI uses magnetic fields, not x-rays, to produce detailed images of the body. MRI can also be used to measure the tumor's size. 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](#)** [7]. 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](#) [8], and it explains the system doctors use to describe the extent of the disease. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.

Links

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

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

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

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

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

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

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24648>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19718>