

Thyroid Cancer

What is thyroid cancer?

Thyroid cancer begins when healthy cells in the thyroid gland change, grow out of control, forming a mass called a tumor. The most common types of thyroid cancer are papillary and follicular. These types are often curable, especially when found early. Other types include medullary, anaplastic, and Hurthle cell cancer. Most tumors of the thyroid are not cancerous.

What is the function of the thyroid?

The thyroid is a gland located in the front of the neck just below the larynx, called the voicebox. A healthy thyroid gland has 2 lobes, 1 on each side of the windpipe, joined by a narrow strip of tissue called the isthmus. The thyroid is part of the endocrine system, which regulates hormones in the body. The gland absorbs iodine from the bloodstream to produce thyroid hormone. This hormone controls a person's metabolism and is necessary for life.

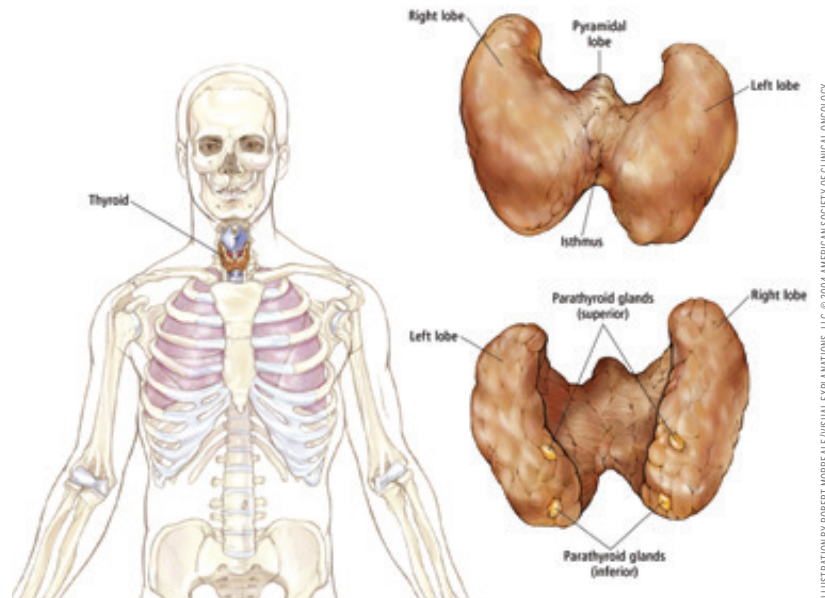


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What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if and where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. There are 4 stages for thyroid cancer: stages I through IV (1 through 4). Find descriptions and illustrations of these stages at www.cancer.net/thyroid.

How is thyroid cancer treated?

The treatment of thyroid cancer depends on the size and location of the tumor, the type of thyroid cancer, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. Treatment options include surgery, hormone therapy, radioactive iodine therapy, external-beam radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and targeted therapy. Surgery is the main treatment for thyroid cancer, and how much of the thyroid is removed depends on the tumor size and the type of thyroid cancer. People treated with surgery usually require hormone therapy to replace the thyroid hormone and slow the growth of any remaining cancer. Radioactive iodine, also called radioiodine or I-131 therapy, may be used to eliminate cancer not removed by surgery and any cancer cells that have spread beyond the thyroid. Radiation therapy, targeted therapy, and/or chemotherapy may be used when an advanced tumor has not responded to radioiodine therapy and is usually given after surgery. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of thyroid cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called palliative care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

How can I cope with thyroid cancer?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

Questions to ask the doctor

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- What type of thyroid cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What is the stage of the cancer? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are available for me? Where are they located, and how do I find out more about them?
- Which treatment, or combination of treatments, do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- Who will be leading my overall treatment and follow-up care?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my sex life or my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of cancer care, who can help me?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/thyroid.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Endocrinologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating problems with glands and the endocrine system

Lobectomy:

Removal of the thyroid lobe that contains cancer

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where it began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Targeted therapy:

Treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth and survival

Thyroidectomy:

Partial or total removal of the thyroid

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue; may also be called a nodule

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