

Thyroid Cancer

■ What is thyroid cancer?

Thyroid cancer begins when healthy cells in the thyroid gland change and grow out of control, forming a mass called a tumor. Most tumors (nodules) of the thyroid gland are not cancerous. If the nodule is cancerous, thyroid cancer cells can spread into normal thyroid tissue and nearby blood and lymph vessels. The most common types of thyroid cancer are papillary and follicular. These types are often curable, especially when found early. Other less common types include medullary and anaplastic thyroid cancer.

■ What is the function of the thyroid?

The thyroid is a gland located in the front of the neck just below 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 and produces hormones. The gland absorbs iodine from the bloodstream to produce thyroid hormone. This hormone controls a person's metabolism and is necessary for life.

■ What does stage mean?

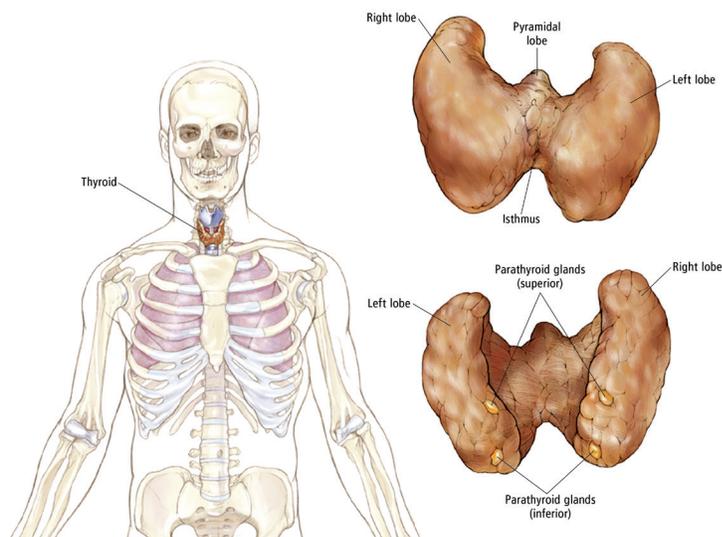
The stage is a way of describing the extent of the cancer, the size of the tumor in the thyroid, if and where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. There are 4 stages for thyroid cancer: stages I through IV (1 through 4). Unlike any other cancer, thyroid cancer uses age as a criteria for staging. This is because age is a key factor in predicting the behavior of the most common types of thyroid cancer. Find descriptions 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. Expert evaluation by a multidisciplinary team with a surgeon and endocrinologist is an important part of managing thyroid cancers. Surgery plays an important role in the treatment of thyroid cancer, and how much of the thyroid is removed depends on the tumor size and the type of thyroid cancer. People who have all thyroid tissue removed, called a total thyroidectomy, 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, is sometimes used when there is concern about cancer remaining or spreading to other parts of the body. It may also be used to eliminate cancer not removed by surgery and any cancer cells that have spread beyond the thyroid. In certain situations, radiation therapy, oral pills that target receptors on thyroid cancer, called targeted therapy, and/or intravenous chemotherapy may be used when an advanced tumor has not responded to radioiodine therapy. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial. Clinical trials are an option to consider for treatment and care for all stages of cancer. 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 supportive care or 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. In addition to cancer treatment directed by your health care team, having support from other professionals, such as social workers, palliative care specialists, mental health professionals, and dietitians can help improve your quality of life and overall well-being.



Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- ▶ 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?
- ▶ If I have a question or problem, who should I call?

Find more questions to ask the health care team at www.cancer.net/thyroid.
For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

Words to Know

- Benign:** A tumor that can grow but will not spread.
- 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 small, bean-shaped organ that fights infection.
- Malignant:** A tumor that can grow and spread to other parts of the body.
- 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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