

When Cancer Spreads to the Bone

What is bone metastasis?

As a cancerous tumor grows, cancer cells may break away and be carried to other parts of the body by the blood or lymphatic system. This is called metastasis. It is called metastases when there are multiple areas in the bone with cancer. One of the most common places cancer spreads is to the bones, especially cancers of the breast, prostate, kidney, thyroid, and lung. When a new tumor develops in the bones as a result of metastasis, it is not called bone cancer. Instead, it is named after the area in the body where the cancer started. For example, lung cancer that spreads to the bones is called metastatic lung cancer.

What are the symptoms of bone metastasis?

When cancer spreads to the bones, the bones can become weak or fragile. Bones most commonly affected include the upper leg bones, the upper arm bones, the spine, ribs, pelvis, and skull. Bone pain is the most common symptom. Bone breaks, called fractures, may also occur. If a tumor presses on the spinal cord, a person may feel weakness or numbness in the legs, arms, or abdomen. Constipation or bladder incontinence, the inability to control urination, is also possible. Bones damaged by cancer may also release high levels of calcium into the blood, called hypercalcemia, causing nausea, fatigue, thirst, frequent urination, and confusion.

How are bone metastases detected?

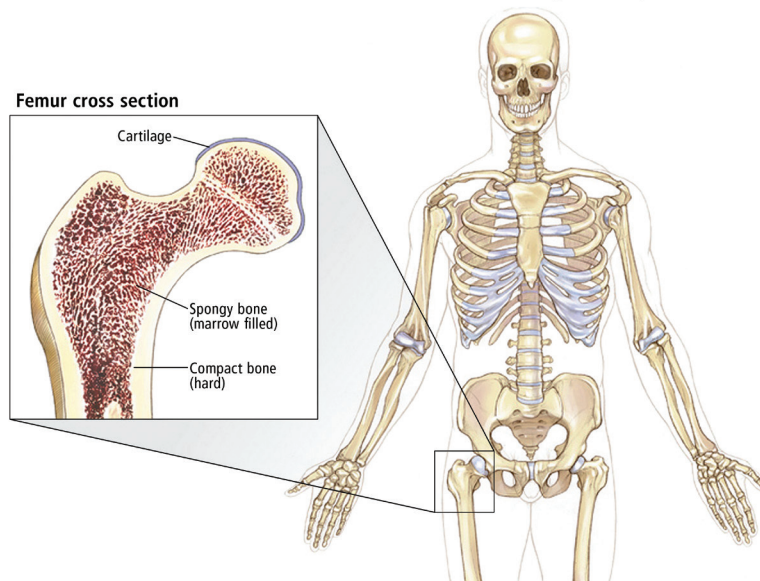
Bone metastases may be found when the primary cancer is diagnosed. Or, if a person is having symptoms, a doctor may recommend having specific tests depending on the types of symptoms and where pain is felt. Imaging tests that may be recommended include x-rays, bone scans, computerized tomography (CT) scans, positron emission tomography (PET) scans, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans. Laboratory tests may be used to check blood or urine for high levels of substances that are released into the body by damaged bones. A bone biopsy may be done if other tests cannot determine whether cancer has spread to the bones.

How are bone metastases treated?

Treatment of bone metastases aims to stop or slow the growth of a tumor, prevent further bone damage, and manage pain or other symptoms. The treatment or combination of treatments used depends on the type of primary cancer that was diagnosed, the location and number of tumors, the person's overall health, and which treatments the person has already received.

Bone-modifying drugs may be given. These medications slow bone thinning, reduce pain, and decrease hypercalcemia. A bone metastasis that is located only in 1 area is commonly treated with radiation therapy to relieve pain and strengthen the bone. Surgery may be used to remove a tumor or prevent or treat a bone fracture, and a special cement can be injected into a bone to stabilize it. Chemotherapy, hormone therapy, and the use of radioactive drugs are treatment options if bone metastases are found in more than 1 area. You and your doctor may also consider a clinical trial. Clinical trials are an option to consider for treatment and care for all stages of cancer. The side effects of these treatments can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called palliative or supportive care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

Human Skeleton (216 bones)



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:

- Which bone or bones has my cancer spread to?
- Can you explain my test results to me?
- What does this mean for my prognosis (chance of recovery)?
- 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 treatments, 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?
- Should I see my dentist before beginning bone-strengthening treatment?
- Would you explain the options for managing my pain with medication?
- In addition to medication, what other strategies can I use to manage bone pain?
- How can a palliative care specialist help me keep my quality of life while I am getting treatment?
- What follow-up tests will I need?
- How will bone metastases affect my daily life? What changes will I need to make to my daily routine to reduce the risk of bone fractures and to manage pain?
- Will bone metastasis prevent me from exercising, participating in sports, or doing any other activities? Is it safe to continue with my current activity level?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of my 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?

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

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WORDS TO KNOW

Bone biopsy:

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

Bone scan:

An imaging test used to find areas of abnormal bone that can be caused by injury, cancer, infection, or inflammation

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Clinical trial:

A research study that tests a new treatment or drug

Hormone therapy:

Treatment that blocks hormones that cause cancer cells to grow

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Osteonecrosis of the jaw:

Weakening and bone loss in the jaw; a rare side effect of some bone-modifying drugs

Osteoporosis:

A condition where the bones become thinner and more porous

Radiation therapy:

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

Radiopharmaceutical therapy:

The use of radioactive drugs to destroy cancer cells

Secondary (metastatic) tumor:

A tumor that started in 1 part of the body and has spread to another

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