

When the Doctor Says “Cancer”

■ What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease that happens when cells in your body change and grow out of control. Healthy cells have a certain structure, function, and a normal life span. They grow by dividing in a controlled process called mitosis. Cancer cells are not normal. They divide faster and without control. Without treatment, they can grow, spread, and cause health problems and even death.

There are more than 100 types of cancer, so learning what type you have is important. You might want to ask your doctor to spell out the name of your cancer. You may write it in the box on this page or ask your doctor or nurse to write it down.

Your doctor can also tell you the stage and grade of the cancer. Knowing the stage and grade can help you and your doctor choose the best treatment plan and make other decisions together.

The type of cancer is: _____

The stage and grade is: _____

Notes: _____

■ What does the stage of cancer mean?

“Stage” is one way to measure cancer. Doctors give many types of cancer a number from 1 to 4. This is called the stage number. It is based on many factors, such as where the cancer is located in the body, how big it is, if it has spread and by how much, and if there is more than 1 tumor.

■ What does the grade of cancer mean?

“Grade” is another way to measure cancer. It describes how much the cancer cells look like healthy cells when compared under a microscope. Like the stage, doctors usually use a number from 1 to 4. Cancer cells that look a lot like healthy cells have a lower number, or grade, than cells that look very abnormal. A lower grade means the cancer is less likely to grow and less likely to spread quickly. Cells that look very different from healthy cells are more likely to grow and spread quickly.

■ How is cancer treated?

Most cancers are treated with surgery, a high-energy treatment called radiation therapy, or medications that treat the whole body to destroy cancer cells. These medications include chemotherapy, targeted therapy, hormone therapy, and immunotherapy. You might have a combination of surgery, radiation therapy, and medications. You may also receive your treatment as part of a research study, called a clinical trial, if you agree to join.

Every cancer treatment can cause side effects. Treatment to relieve side effects is an important part of your cancer treatment plan. You might hear this treatment called “supportive care” or “palliative care.”

■ How can I cope with having cancer?

Staying organized and getting support are important. You can use a notebook, file folder, or mobile app to keep health information in one place and share it with people involved in your care. This is especially important when you are upset, confused, or not feeling well.

Ask to speak to a counselor, social worker, patient navigator, or another health care professional to get answers to questions about insurance and finances, emotional support, and help with daily activities. Getting support will help you and your loved ones cope with the diagnosis and treatment. Find more information at www.cancer.net/coping.

Questions to ask the health care team

It is normal to have many questions about cancer. Ask all the questions you have, even if they do not seem related to cancer. You might want to write them down for your next appointment or phone call. 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 cancer do I have?
- ▶ What is the stage and grade of the cancer?
- ▶ What are the usual types of treatment for this type of cancer? Do you think those are the best options for me, or would something different work better? Why?
- ▶ Is there a clinical trial available for me?
- ▶ Is the goal of each treatment to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- ▶ Who will be part of my health care team? What does each person do? How do I contact them?
- ▶ Will my insurance cover my cancer treatment? Who can help me find out?
- ▶ How soon do I need to start treatment, and why? How long do you expect it to take?
- ▶ What side effects can I expect? Who can help with controlling or preventing side effects?
- ▶ Will I be able to work during treatment? Will I need to take time off or get help at home?
- ▶ How will the treatment affect my ability to have sex? To have children?
- ▶ Will the treatment cause long-term, or lifelong, effects?
- ▶ Who can I talk to about having cancer? Is there a support group or counselor available?
- ▶ If I have a question or problem, who should I call?

Find more questions to ask your health care team at www.cancer.net/questions.
For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app. Find pictures of the parts of the body that cancer affects at www.cancer.net/illustrations.

Words to Know

Biopsy: A sample of tissue that is taken from your body to check for cancer cells.

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells, usually by keeping them from growing.

Clinical trials: Research studies that use human volunteers to test new medications and other treatments. Clinical trial treatments are safe enough to study but may not yet be available to the public.

Hormone therapy: Treatment that removes, blocks, or adds hormones to destroy or slow the growth of cancer cells.

Immunotherapy: Treatment designed to help fight the cancer by boosting the body's natural defenses.

Prognosis: Chance of recovery or of doing well with treatment.

Radiation therapy: The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

Side effects: Problems or feelings that a medicine or other treatment causes. For example, nausea can be a side effect of chemotherapy.

Supportive care: Care that relieves side effects and helps patients feel better during illness and treatment. It is also called "palliative care."

Surgery: Removing diseased or damaged tissue from the body during an operation.

Targeted therapy: Treatment designed to fight specific genes or proteins that allow the cancer to grow and survive.

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