

About a Cancer Diagnosis

Cancer takes many forms. No two people have the same cancer journey. This sheet explains some of the ways that doctors talk about cancer. It may help you to understand your cancer.



What is a cancer stage?

When a person is first found to have cancer, doctors do exams and tests to learn the cancer's **stage**. The stage describes several things about the cancer, including:

- Where it is in the body
- Whether it has spread in the body

A cancer is usually described by the stage and part of the body where it was first found. This is still the case even after the cancer changes or spreads.

The stage of a cancer helps you and your cancer team know things such as:

- What types of treatments to think about
- Whether the cancer is likely to come back



What is a tumor marker?

Sometimes cancer can be found by measuring substances produced by cancer cells. These are called tumor markers. They can be found in blood, urine, or other tissues. They are made by both healthy and cancerous cells. High levels of tumor markers usually point to cancer.



What is a cancer grade?

Doctors may look at magnified images of cancer cells, using a microscope. This is to see how normal or not normal they look. Cancer cells that look more like normal cells are a sign of a cancer that is likely to grow slowly. Cells that look very abnormal are a sign of a cancer that is likely to grow quickly.



Write down what your doctor has told you about your cancer stage. Also write down any questions you have.

What is genetic testing?

Cancer happens when cells in your body get incorrect instructions on how to grow and divide. These instructions are given by genes. Incorrect instructions are often caused by gene changes called **mutations**. Tests can be done to look for gene mutations.

Some genetic tests give information about the risk of getting cancer. Other genetic tests are done on cancer cells. These are done to find out how the disease may go and what types of treatments may help.



Cancer terms you may hear

- **Biopsy:** A doctor removes some tissue so the cells can be analyzed.
- **Invasive:** Describes cancer that has spread from where it started into nearby tissues.
- **Lymph node:** Part of the immune system. Your body has many lymph nodes. Cancer often shows up in lymph nodes, especially after it is found elsewhere in the body.
- **Pathology:** A pathology report contains a description of cancer cells. It is written by a doctor who examines tissues.
- **Progression:** Disease that is spreading or growing.
- **Tumor:** An abnormal collection of cells that forms a lump or mass.

Terms you want explained

Use the spaces below to write down words that you want explained. It doesn't matter if you don't know how to spell the words. Write them down so you can remember to ask your cancer team about them.

Metastasis: Cancer that has spread from where it started to another part of the body.
