

Questions to ask your health care team

- What caused my cancer?
- At what stage and/or grade is my cancer?
- What tests will I need to find out the stage and grade of my cancer?
- When will I get the results of these tests?
- What treatment will I have for my cancer?
- What other treatment options do I have?
- When will I begin treatment?
- When and how will I know if the treatment worked?

Understanding your cancer diagnosis and treatment

You should feel free to ask questions of members of your healthcare team. You should know and understand the risks and benefits of any medicine, treatment, or decision about your health care. You have the right to a consultation with another physician (second opinion). If you have any other concerns, you can speak with members of your healthcare team or the Patient Representative (if available in your area) who can further advise you of your rights and responsibilities.

Looking for more information on this topic?

You can contact the Canadian Cancer Society at www.cancer.ca or call the Cancer Information Service of the Cancer Society at 1-888-939-3333. You can also contact your local public library for books, videos, magazine articles and online health information. For a list of public libraries in Nova Scotia go to <http://publiclibraries.ns.ca>.

Cancer Care Nova Scotia has made an electronic patient education program, the Oncology Interactive Education Series (OIES), available in most health districts in Nova Scotia. Please check with your health care team, your Cancer Patient Navigator, or your health care library to see if this program is available in your district and to learn how to use the program.

For more information visit *Cancer Care Nova Scotia's* website www.cancercare.ns.ca



Capital Health

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Cancer



Cancer is not a single disease. There is no single thing that causes cancer. There are more than 100 types of diseases that we call cancer.

What is cancer?

Cancer develops when cells in your body become abnormal and grow out of control. These abnormal cells don't let your healthy cells and organs do their normal job, and affect the way your body normally works.

When cells grow in ways they shouldn't, we call these cells **abnormal**. As a group, they can spread out of control. Sometimes, they form a mass, or lump, called a **tumour**.

There are 2 types of tumours:

- **Benign** tumours are not cancer. They do not spread to other parts of the body.
- **Malignant** tumours are cancerous. The cancer cells in these tumours can spread to other parts of the body.

In some types of cancer, such as leukemia, abnormal cells start to grow in many places at the same time.

Metastasis (pronounced met-ass-ta-sees) is when cancer cells break away from the tumour and travel through your blood or lymph system to other parts of the body where they start to grow.

Who gets cancer?

Doctors can't say for sure who will or will not get cancer. They do know that some people are more likely to get it than others. If you are more **likely** to get a type of cancer, doctors say that you are in a **high-risk group** for cancer. If you are in a high-risk group, it doesn't mean that you will get cancer; it just means that you should follow your doctor's advice. For example, your doctor might suggest that one of the many reasons to quit smoking is to reduce your risk of getting lung cancer.

What are the different types of cancer?

There are four main types of cancer:

- Carcinomas are the most common type of cancer. They start in the bowel, breasts, cervix, lungs, kidneys, ovaries, prostate gland, or in the skin.
- Leukemias are cancers of the white blood cells.

- Lymphomas are cancers of the lymph system. This system in your body is made up of the spleen, lymph nodes, and lymph vessels. The lymph system carries food, oxygen and water to the cells in your tissues.
- Sarcomas are cancers that start in the muscles, bones, and cartilage. Cartilage is at the ends of your bones and grows to form new bones.

How does the doctor know what type of cancer I have?

Cancers are most often named after the part of the body where the cancer started. Some examples are breast cancer, lung cancer, or prostate cancer.

The cancer is also named for the type of tissue where it started. To find out what kind of cancer cells you have, your doctor may want to do a biopsy. This involves taking out a small sample of the cells, looking at them under a microscope, and doing special tests on them. The purpose of this is to find out as much about the cancer cells as possible. This helps the doctor decide what treatment you need.

For most types of cancers, your doctor will want to do tests to find out:

- The stage of your cancer
- The grade of your cancer
- Both the stage and grade of your cancer

Grade of cancer

The grade of your cancer describes how different your cancer is from normal cells. Your doctor might describe your cancer as:

- **Low-grade** – This means that the cancer cells are less active and may not spread.
- **Medium-grade** – This means that some of the cancer cells may break away and spread to other parts of your body.
- **High-grade** – This means that the cancer cells are growing more actively, and are more likely to spread to other parts of your body. Some high-grade cancers do not spread to other parts of your body.

Stage of cancer

Staging tells you where the cancer was when you were diagnosed with cancer. This helps your doctor plan your treatment and tell you the likely outcome of your cancer.

In order to find out the stage of your cancer, you will need to have tests to find out:

- Where your cancer is
- How big your cancer is

- If your cancer is growing into other parts of your body near the cancer
- If your cancer had spread into other parts of your body.

Your doctor may suggest you have the following tests:

- Mammograms
- Bone scans
- CAT scans
- Chest X-rays
- Ultrasound scans
- Blood tests
- Exploratory surgery
- ... and many others.

How do cancer treatments work?

The goals of cancer treatment depend on the type and stage of your cancer. They can be to:

1. Cure your cancer;
2. Remove or shrink the cancer;
3. Kill cancer cells that may have spread;
4. Reduce the risk of cancer coming back; and
5. Help you cope with cancer symptoms, such as pain.

You may need one or more types of cancer treatment. Your health care team member will develop a plan with you. Some types of treatment are:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiation therapy
- Surgery
- Combination therapy
- Immunotherapy
- Bone marrow or stem cell transplants

Does cancer treatment work?

Many factors will affect how well your treatment works. It is important for you to talk with your health care team about your treatment and how well you can expect it to work.