

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**.

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

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.

When cancer cells break away from the tumour and travel through your blood or lymph system to other parts of your body where they start to grow, this is called **metastasis** (pronounced 'met-ass-ta-sees).

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 cancers:

- **Carcinomas** are the most common type of cancer. They may 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 is the system in your body that 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 muscles, bones, and cartilage. Cartilage is at the ends of your bones and grows to form new bone.

How do doctors 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, so that the doctor can 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, and
- if your cancer has spread into other parts of your body.

The kinds of tests that your doctor might do are:

- mammograms
- bone scans
- CAT scans
- chest x-rays
- ultrasound scans
- blood tests
- exploratory surgery
- ...and many others.



What do cancer treatments do?

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.
5. Help you cope with cancer symptoms, such as pain.

You may need one or more types of cancer treatment. Your health care team 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 to your health care team about your treatment and how well you can expect it to work.

Questions to ask your health care team

- What caused my cancer?
- At what stage or grade is my cancer?
- What tests will I need to find out the stage or 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?
- Should I get a second opinion?



This fact sheet is meant to support the information that your health care team gives you. It is also meant to encourage you to ask questions to your health care team. This fact sheet does **not** replace any information that your healthcare team gives you.

Living Well With Cancer is a partnership among several people living with cancer, health care professionals, people who represent cancer and professional organizations, and Ortho Biotech. The LWWC partnership gratefully acknowledges the input of the QEII Health Sciences Centre in this fact sheet.

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Printed in Canada. May 2001.

LWWC102E-2001