



Confusing Cancer Terminology

Making Sense During Difficult Times

Almost 13 million people worldwide are diagnosed with cancer every year. People may experience unexplained pain, weight loss, fatigue and other symptoms followed by screening tests, imaging, and maybe biopsies before getting the dreaded diagnosis. Learning that you or a loved one has cancer is overwhelming and stressful.

What can add to the emotional distress of a cancer diagnosis is the barrage of confusing medical terminology or jargon. These \$3 words can have double meanings or just be plain old confusing. For example, isn't a 'positive' result good, and a 'negative' result bad? When it comes to cancer testing, a positive result means cancer and a negative result means no cancer. At a time when you have to make hard decisions, it helps to have plain language explanations for some of the basic terms of "cancerspeak."

Prevention refers to reducing the risk of developing disease, in this case, cancer. It may involve screening tests, like mammograms or colonoscopies, or making lifestyle changes, such as starting to exercise, improving your diet or quitting smoking. Even after a cancer diagnosis, there are preventive measures worth taking to reduce the risk of worsening cancer (and other health conditions) or improving your treatment outcome.

A **benign** growth or tumor is one that is not cancerous. A **malignant** tumor is a growth or mass of cancer cells. In most cases, a malignant tumor indicates cancer and requires treatment.

To evaluate a growth, a **biopsy** is performed. A sample of tissue is removed to see if cancer is present. A biopsy may be performed by removing fluid and cells with a needle or through a surgical incision, depending upon the location and type of tumor. A biopsy report may refer to an organ as **unremarkable**, indicating that there is no cancer, or **remarkable**, meaning cancer is present. In an effort to remove a growth in full during biopsy or surgery, a **margin**, or portion, of healthy tissue around the suspicious tissue is also removed. Clean (or clear) margins means that no cancerous cells were left behind.

Cancer **staging** is the process of determining whether cancer has spread and where. There are several staging systems, but the most commonly used is TNM. T stands for the size of the tumor, N refers to whether the cancer has spread to lymph nodes, and M described whether the cancer has spread (*metastasized*). There are 2 main types of staging: 1) clinical staging is an estimate of the cancer based on exam, imaging tests and biopsies; 2) pathological staging is

Growth or Mass?

Cancer can be described in many ways. Growth, mass, lump, tumor, malignancy, suspicious or abnormal tissue are some of the different words that may be used to describe cancerous cells. **Neoplasm** is another commonly used word to describe a new and abnormal tissue growth.

Clinical Trials

There is no *one size fits all* solution to treating cancer. Some patients elect to participate in clinical trials—research studies performed with human volunteers to test new treatments found promising when studied in a lab. When current standard treatments aren't an option for a patient or have not been successful, clinical trials offer a treatment alternative. They also contribute to the advancement of scientific research for a cancer cure.

Before participating in a clinical trial, be sure to ask about why the treatment shows promise compared to existing approaches and what side effects can be expected. As always, it's important to evaluate if the potential benefits outweigh the risks.

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determined by studying tumor samples after removal during surgery.

One of the earliest questions to ask your cancer doctor (oncologist) is about **prognosis**, a prediction about the course or **trajectory** the cancer will take and chances for survival. While you may be given an idea of your prognosis, it is difficult to accurately predict. While stressful work and home lives, financial worries and unexpected complications can take their toll, a healthy diet, physical activity and support from family and friends may improve outcomes.

Localized cancer is restricted to the organ where it began. When cancer has **metastasized**, it means that the original cancer has spread to other locations in the body. Cancer usually spreads through the bloodstream or lymphatic system (tissues, nodes and organs that help rid the body of toxins and waste). Metastasis can be regional, or local, (the lymph nodes, tissues or organs near where the cancer began) such as breast cancer with lymph node involvement. Or metastasis can be distant (organs and tissues that are farther away from the primary site) such as kidney cancer that spreads to the lungs.

Carcinoma is a cancer that starts in the lining (epithelial cells) of organs. The majority of cancers are carcinomas. **Carcinoma in situ** refers to an early stage of cancer in which the cancerous cells are only in the organ where they originated; the cancer has not spread, or metastasized, to other parts of the body. In situ carcinomas generally have high cure rates.

A **carcinogen** is an external or environmental factor that causes cancer or helps it to grow. Pollution, radon gas and tobacco are carcinogens.

To treat cancer, your oncologist may recommend surgery, chemotherapy

and/or radiation. **Chemotherapy**, or chemo, is a treatment that uses powerful drugs to kill cancer cells. It is usually used to treat cancer that has spread, come back or at high risk for recurring. The medication is usually delivered by IV (intra-venous) infusion. **Radiation** therapy uses high-energy, focused radiation to shrink tumors and kill cancer cells. It can be delivered by a machine directed towards the body or by placing radioactive material near the cancer cells in the body. Since chemo and radiation also kill healthy cells, special care is needed to rebuild strength during and following treatment. **Chemoprevention** is the use of medication to lower the risk of recurrence or prevent cancer in healthy people with strong risk factors for developing cancer. Tamoxifen is an example of a drug used to prevent the recurrence of breast cancer after treatment is completed.

Remission is a period of time that cancer is under control. It may not mean that cancer has been cured, but that the signs and symptoms of cancer are not present.

Palliative care refers to care that is provided in addition to cancer treatment to relieve symptoms, such as pain, and improve quality of life.

Hospice care is for people who have decided to focus on comfort and quality of life rather than treatment. Palliative care is offered during cancer treatment and hospice care.

When you need plain language explanations, call KnovaSolutions. We can help with complicated medical information as well as any other concerns about a cancer (or other) diagnosis. We'll listen carefully and help you manage during this very difficult time. **Call KnovaSolutions at 800/355-0885**, Monday through Friday, 8 am - 5 pm, Mountain Time.