

# TERMS TO KNOW: CANCER GLOSSARY

A cancer diagnosis turns a person's world upside down. This fact sheet defines various cancer-related terms.

## TERMS

**Benign:** Not cancerous.

**Caregiver:** If you are helping to care for a loved one, you are a "caregiver."

**Chemotherapy:** Chemotherapy or 'chemo' is a type of treatment that uses drugs to stop and kill rapidly growing cancer cells.

**Clinical trials:** Research studies that evaluate new drugs or procedures on people living with cancer are called clinical trials. Each study is carefully designed to improve or create new methods of screening, prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of a cancer.

**Colonoscopy:** A procedure that examines the colon for cancer is called a colonoscopy. A doctor will insert a thin tube into the rectum to view the colon and screen for cancer.



**Constipation:** Defined as fewer than three bowel movements a week (although fewer than four or five may be a reduced number for some people), this symptom can be caused by:

- Chemotherapy
- Low fluid intake
- Low amounts of fiber in the diet
- Anti-nausea medications
- Opiate pain medications

**Diarrhea:** Defined as two or more loose stools per day, diarrhea may be caused by certain chemotherapy drugs.

**Fatigue:** Feeling tired—really tired—may be tied to a number of factors:

- Cancer treatment
- The cancer itself
- The emotional aspects of coping with cancer and cancer pain
- Anemia (low levels of red blood cells, the iron-containing cells that carry vital oxygen from the lungs to the muscles and other tissues in the body)

**Lymphedema:** Lymphedema is a painful swelling that happens when your body's lymphatic fluid is unable to circulate properly and builds up in your soft tissues instead. It usually occurs in an arm or leg.

**Oncology nurse:** A health care professional who cares for a person with cancer by providing bedside care, preparing and administering treatments, providing supportive care, and educating the person with cancer and their family about their cancer, treatments, and side effects.

**Oncology social worker:** Oncology social workers are professionals who counsel people affected by cancer and help them access practical assistance. They can provide individual counseling, support groups, locate services that help with home care or transportation, and guide people through the process of applying for Social Security disability or other forms of assistance. CancerCare's oncology social workers are available to help face-to-face, online or on the telephone, free of charge.

**Malignant:** Cancerous.

**Mammogram:** The most important screening test for breast cancer is the mammogram. A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. It can detect breast cancer before the tumor can be felt by you or your doctor.

**Medical oncologist:** A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancers with chemotherapy, targeted therapies and other treatments. They manage cancer treatment and coordinate with the treatment team.

**Metastasize:** To spread.

**Mucositis:** Chemotherapy can cause sores inside the mouth and on the mucous lining of the throat and digestive tract. These sores are called mucositis.

**Neutropenia:** An unusually low number of neutrophils, a type of infection-fighting white blood cell.

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**Peripheral neuropathy:** Some people on chemotherapy experience numbness or tingling in their hands and feet—what doctors call peripheral neuropathy. Symptoms related to neuropathy and other types of nerve damage may include:

- Difficulty picking up objects or buttoning clothing
- Problems with balance
- Difficulty walking
- Hearing loss

**Palliative care:** This is specialized medical care for people with serious illnesses. It focuses on providing relief from the symptoms, pain and stress of a serious illness, including cancer. The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and loved ones.

**Prostate exam:** For this test, also called a digital rectal exam, the doctor inserts a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum and feels the surface of the prostate for any lumps, swelling or other abnormalities.

**Radiation therapy:** This type of therapy uses high-energy x-rays or other types of radiation to destroy cancer cells or keep them from growing.

**Targeted treatments:** This type of treatment blocks cancer cells' ability to grow, divide and spread.

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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