

You will likely hear many new terms after a cancer diagnosis. This fact sheet defines various cancer-related terms.



Terms to Know

Anti-inflammatory: Reduces swelling, discomfort and inflammation.

Asymptomatic: Not showing or feeling symptoms of a disease.

Benign: Not cancerous, as in a tumor. It won't metastasize or invade local tissues, although it can still have harmful effects if not treated.

Biomarker: A molecule found in blood, bodily fluids or tissues. They can help diagnose cancer or predict a person's response to treatment. They are also known as a biological marker.

Biopsy: A procedure performed by a surgeon to collect cells or tissues for analysis.

Cancer: An abnormal growth of cells in which the cells grow and divide out of control.

Carcinoma: Cancers that originate in the epithelial cells of organs. These are the cells that line the surface of the outside and inside of the body.

Colonoscopy: A procedure in which a doctor inserts a thin tube into the rectum to examine the colon and look for cancer.

Computed tomography (CAT/CT) scan: A form of imaging more detailed than an X-ray that allows doctors to see inside the body. They can locate tumors and see any changes occurring.

Etiology: Another word for the cause of an illness or disease.

Localized: A cancer tumor is localized when it has not spread to other parts of the body.

Lump: A mass located inside the body that can be benign (harmless) or malignant (harmful).

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI): A type of test that uses a magnet and radio waves to see what is occurring inside the body.

Malignant: Cancerous and can be harmful and dangerous if left untreated.

Mammogram: An X-ray of one or both breasts. It is the most important screening test for breast cancer. It can detect breast cancer before the tumor can be seen or felt by you or your doctor.

Medical oncologist: A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancers. They manage cancer treatment and coordinate with the treatment team, which includes the oncology nurse and social worker.



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Metastasize: To spread to other locations in the body. This occurs through the bloodstream or lymph system.

Oncology: A branch of medicine that focuses on the causes, prevention and treatment of cancer.

Oncologist: A doctor who treats cancer.

Oncology nurse: A health care professional who cares for a person with cancer by providing bedside care, giving treatments and support. They educate the person with cancer and their family about their diagnosis, treatments and side effects.

Oncology social worker: Professionals who counsel people affected by cancer, including caregivers and loved ones. They can find resources and answer questions. CancerCare's oncology social workers are available to help, free of charge.

Positron emission tomography (PET) scan: A form of imaging that uses a special dye with radioactive tracers, given by mouth or in the vein. It is used to track cancer treatment and progress.

Prostate exam: A test in which the doctor inserts a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum and feels the surface of the prostate for any lumps, swelling or other potential issues. Also called a digital rectal exam.

Recurrence: This means that a cancer has returned after a period where it could not be detected.

Remission: This means that the signs of cancer have been reduced or have disappeared.

Staging: A term that explains the extent of cancer. How it is classified depends on whether the cancer has spread within the body and to where.

Tumor markers: Substances produced by cancer cells or by normal cells in response to cancer cells. They are found by analyzing a sample of tumor tissue or body fluid and can help find and diagnose cancer.

X-ray: A form of imaging that uses electromagnetic waves to see inside the body and detect tumors.

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