

Some people believe they are being punished for something they did or failed to do in the past. Some people think that if they had just done what they knew was right, they wouldn't have gotten cancer. Most people wonder if they somehow caused the cancer themselves.

If you are having these thoughts, you're not alone. All of these ideas and beliefs are common among people with cancer. But cancer is not a punishment for your past actions. Try not to blame yourself or look for ways you might somehow have prevented cancer.

Cancer is not your fault, and there is almost never a way to find out exactly what caused it. Instead, focus on taking good care of yourself now.

For more information, please visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

# What is cancer?



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## Cancer is not just one disease.

There are many types of cancer. It is not just one disease. Cancer can start in many different places in the body. It can start in the lungs, the breast, the colon, or even in the blood. Cancers are alike in some ways, but each type of cancer is different in the way it grows and spreads.

## How are cancers alike?

The cells in our bodies all have certain jobs to do. Normal cells divide in an orderly way. They die when they are worn out or damaged, and then they are replaced with new cells. Cancer is a disease in which cells start to grow out of control. The cancer cells keep on growing and making new cells. They crowd out normal cells. This causes problems in the part of the body where the cancer started.

Cancer cells can also spread to other parts of the body. For example, cancer cells in the lung can travel to the bones and grow there. When cancer cells spread, it is called *metastasis* (muh-TAS-tuh-sis). When lung cancer spreads to the bones, it is still called lung cancer because that is where it started. It is not called bone cancer unless it started in the bones. Cancers can sometimes recur (or come back) after treatment, mostly at the site where they started but sometimes at a distant site like lungs, liver, brain, or bone.

## How are cancers different?

Some cancers tend to grow and spread very quickly. Others grow more slowly. Cancers also respond to treatment in different ways. Some types are best treated with surgery. Others do better with drugs called *chemotherapy* (key-mo-THER-uh-pee). Often 2 or more treatments are used to get the best results.

When someone has cancer, the doctor will want to find out what kind of cancer it is. People with cancer need treatment that is aimed at their type of cancer.

## What are tumors?

Most cancers form a lump that doctors call a tumor or a growth. Not all tumors (lumps) are cancer. Doctors have to take out a piece of the lump and look at it to find out if it is cancer. Lumps that are not cancer are called *benign* (be-NINE). Lumps that are cancer are called *malignant* (muh-LIG-nunt).

There are also a few kinds of cancer, like leukemia (cancer of the blood), that do not form tumors. They grow in the blood or other cells of the body.

## What stage is your cancer?

The doctor also needs to know whether the cancer has spread from the place where it started. If it has, he or she needs to know how far it has spread. After the doctor finds this out, he or she can tell you the stage of your cancer.

For each type of cancer, there are tests that can be done to figure out the stage of the cancer. As a rule, a lower stage (such as a Stage I or II) means that the cancer has not spread very much. A higher number (such as a Stage III or IV) means it has spread more. Ask your doctor to explain the stage of your cancer and what that means for you in words that you can understand.

## How is cancer treated?

The most common treatments for cancer are surgery, chemotherapy, and *radiation* (ray-dee-A-shun).

Surgery is used to remove the cancer when it is confined to the organ where it started. The surgeon might also take part or all of the organ it affects. For breast cancer, part (or all) of the breast might be removed. For prostate cancer, the prostate gland might be removed. But surgery is not used for all types of cancer.

Chemo (which is short for chemotherapy) is the use of drugs to kill cancer cells or to slow their growth. Some chemo is given by IV (put into a vein using a needle), some as a shot, and others are swallowed as a pill or liquid. Because chemo drugs travel to nearly all parts of the body, they are useful for cancer that has spread.

Radiation treatment is also used to kill or slow the growth of cancer cells. It can be used alone or with surgery or chemo. Radiation treatment is like getting x-rays. Or sometimes it can be given by placing “seeds” that give off radiation inside the tumor.

## What treatment is best for me?

Your cancer treatment will depend on what is best for you. Some cancers respond better to surgery. Others respond better to chemo or some other treatment. Some types of cancer are best treated with chemo and surgery, or chemo and radiation. Knowing the type of cancer you have is the first step toward knowing which treatments will work the best for you.

The stage of your cancer will also help the doctor know what treatment is best for you. For instance, a Stage III or IV cancer is more likely to respond better to treatments that treat the whole body, like chemo.

Your health and the treatment you prefer will also play a part in deciding which treatment will be best for you. Not all types of treatment will work for your cancer, so be sure that you know your options. And treatments do have side effects, so be sure you know what to expect with each treatment, too.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. It is your right to know what treatments are most likely to help you and what the side effects may be.

## Why did this happen to me?

One of the most common questions that a person has after being diagnosed with cancer is, “What did I do wrong?” or “Why me?” Doctors don't know for sure what causes cancer in each case. When doctors can't fully explain a cause, many people come up with their own ideas about why they have the disease.