

Definitions to help you understand cancer lingo

COMMON CANCER TERMINOLOGY

Asking the right questions can help you make better informed decisions about your health. The following definitions will help you speak the cancer language as you are on the road to wellness.

COMMON TERMS

Adjunct therapy (A-junkt THAYR-uh-pee)

A treatment used together with the primary treatment. Its purpose is to assist the primary treatment. Also called adjunctive therapy.

Adjuvant therapy (A-joo-vant THAYR-uh-pee)

Treatment given after the primary treatment to increase the chances of a cure. Adjuvant therapy may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, or biological therapy.

Benign (beh-NINE)

Not cancer. Benign tumors may grow larger but do not spread to other parts of the body.

Biopsy (BY-op-see)

The removal of cells or tissues for examination by a pathologist. The pathologist may study the tissue under a microscope or perform other tests on the cells or tissue. There are many different types of biopsy procedures.

BRCA1

A gene on chromosome 17 that normally helps to suppress cell growth. A person who inherits certain mutations (changes) in a BRCA1 gene has a higher risk of getting breast, ovarian, prostate, and other types of cancer.

BRCA2

A gene on chromosome 13 that normally helps to suppress cell growth. A person who inherits certain mutations (changes) in a BRCA2 gene has a higher risk of getting breast, ovarian, prostate, and other types of cancer.

CA-125

A substance that may be found in high amounts in the blood of patients with certain types of cancer, including ovarian cancer. CA-125 levels may also help monitor how well cancer treatments are working or if cancer has come back. Also called cancer antigen 125.

Cancer (KAN-ser)

A term for diseases in which abnormal cells divide without control and can invade nearby tissues. Cancer cells can also spread to other parts of the body through the blood and lymph systems. There are several main types of cancer. Carcinoma is cancer that begins in the skin or in tissues that line or cover internal organs. Sarcoma is cancer that begins in bone, cartilage, fat, muscle, blood vessels, or other connective or supportive tissue. Leukemia is cancer that starts in blood-forming tissue such as the bone marrow, and causes large numbers of abnormal blood cells to be produced and enter the blood. Lymphoma and multiple myeloma are cancers that begin in the cells of the immune system. Central nervous system cancers are cancers that begin in the tissues of the brain and spinal cord.

When it comes to cancer, a little bit of knowledge goes a long way. By speaking your doctor's language, you are positioned to ask the right questions to make better informed health decisions.

CAT scan

A series of detailed pictures of areas inside the body taken from different angles. The pictures are created by a computer linked to an X-ray machine. Also called computed tomography scan, computerised axial tomography scan, computerised tomography, and CT scan.

CEA

A substance that is sometimes found in an increased amount in the blood of people who have certain cancers, other diseases, or who smoke. It is used as a tumor marker for colorectal cancer. Also called carcinoembryonic antigen.

Complete remission

The disappearance of all signs of cancer in response to treatment. This does not always mean the cancer has been cured. Also called complete response.

Fecal occult blood test (FEE-kul uh-KULT ...)

A test to check for blood in the stool. Small samples of stool are placed on special cards and sent to a doctor or laboratory for testing. Blood in the stool may be a sign of colorectal cancer. Also called FOBT.

Grading

A system for classifying cancer cells in terms of how abnormal they appear when examined under a microscope. The objective of a grading system is to provide information about the probable growth rate of the tumor and its tendency to spread. The systems used to grade tumors vary with each type of cancer. Grading plays a role in treatment decisions.

Important Note: This information has been compiled for your convenience only. You should consult your health care provider for the advice and care appropriate for your specific medical needs.

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Mammography (ma-MAH-gruh-fee)

The use of X-rays to create a picture of the breast.

Metastasis (meh-TAS-tuh-sis)

The spread of cancer from one part of the body to another. A tumor formed by cells that have spread is called a "metastatic tumor" or a "metastasis." The metastatic tumor contains cells that are like those in the original (primary) tumor. The plural form of metastasis is metastases (meh-TAS-tuh-SEEZ).

MRI

A procedure in which radio waves and a powerful magnet linked to a computer are used to create detailed pictures of areas inside the body. These pictures can show the difference between normal and diseased tissue. MRI makes better images of organs and soft tissue than other scanning techniques, such as computed tomography (CT) or X-ray. MRI is especially useful for imaging the brain, the spine, the soft tissue of joints, and the inside of bones. Also called magnetic resonance imaging, NMRI, and nuclear magnetic resonance imaging.

Oncologist (on-KAH-loh-jist)

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer. Some oncologists specialize in a particular type of cancer treatment. For example, a radiation oncologist specializes in treating cancer with radiation.

Pap smear

A procedure in which cells are scraped from the cervix for examination under a microscope. It is used to detect cancer and changes that may lead to cancer. A Pap smear can also show noncancerous conditions, such as infection or inflammation. Also called Pap test and Papanicolaou test.

Positron Emission Tomography scan or PET scan (PAH-zih-tron ee-MIH-shun toh-MAH-gruh-fee skan)

A procedure in which a small amount of radioactive glucose (sugar) is injected into a vein, and a scanner is used to make detailed, computerized pictures of areas inside the body where the glucose is used. Because cancer cells often use more glucose than normal cells, the pictures can be used to find cancer cells in the body.

Prostate-specific antigen test (PROS-tayt-speh-SIH-fik AN-tih-jen ...)

A blood test that measures the level of prostate-specific antigen (PSA), a substance produced by the prostate and some other tissues in the body. Increased levels of PSA may be a sign of prostate cancer.

Radiation (RAY-dee-AY-shun)

Energy released in the form of particle or electromagnetic waves. Common sources of radiation include radon gas, cosmic rays from outer space, medical X-rays, and energy given off by a radioisotope (unstable form of a chemical element that releases radiation as it breaks down and becomes more stable).