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What Is Cancer?

Cancer affects 1 in 3 people in the United States. Chances are that you or someone you know has been affected by cancer. Here is some information to help you better understand what cancer is.

- [Cancer is more than just one disease](#)
- [What is a tumor?](#)
- [What is the difference between a benign and a malignant tumor?](#)
- [What causes cancer?](#)
- [What is the cancer stage?](#)
- [How does cancer spread?](#)

You are made up of trillions of cells that over your lifetime normally grow and divide as needed. When cells are abnormal or get old, they usually die. Cancer starts when something goes wrong in this process and your cells keep making new cells and the old or abnormal ones don't die when they should. As the cancer cells grow out of control, they can crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for your body to work the way it should.

For many people, cancer can be treated successfully. In fact, more people than ever before are leading full lives after cancer treatment.

Cancer is more than just one disease

There are many types of cancer. Cancer can develop anywhere in the body and is named for the part of the body where it started. For instance, breast cancer that starts in the breast is still called breast cancer even if it spreads (metastasizes) to other parts of the body.

times, there is no obvious cause.

What is the cancer stage?

When a cancer is found, tests are done to see how big the cancer is and whether it has spread from where it started. This is called the [cancer's stage](#)².

A lower stage (such as a stage 1 or 2) means that the cancer has not spread very much. A higher number (such as a stage 3 or 4) means it has spread more. Stage 4 is the highest stage.

The stage of the cancer is very important in choosing the best treatment for a person. Ask your doctor about your cancer's stage and what it means for you.

How does cancer spread?

Cancer can spread from where it started (the primary site) to other parts of the body.

When cancer cells break away from a tumor, they can travel to other areas of the body through either the bloodstream or the lymph system. Most of these escaped cancer cells die or are killed before they can start growing somewhere else. But one or two might settle in a new area, begin to grow, and form new tumors. This spread of cancer to a new part of the body is called **metastasis**. Learn more in [How Does Cancer Spread?](#)³

cancer/understanding/what-is-cancer. Updated March 9, 2015. Accessed November 6, 2020.

National Cancer Institute. What is cancer? Cancer.gov. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/what-is-cancer>. Updated February 9, 2015. Accessed November 6, 2020.

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Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-6>