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# Vaginal Cancer Early Detection, Diagnosis, and Staging

Know the signs and symptoms of vaginal cancer. Find out how vaginal cancer is tested for, diagnosed, and staged.

## Detection and Diagnosis

Finding cancer early, when it's small and hasn't spread, often allows for more treatment options. Some early cancers may have signs and symptoms that can be noticed, but that's not always the case.

- [Can Vaginal Cancer Be Found Early?](#)
- [Signs and Symptoms of Vaginal Cancer](#)
- [Tests for Vaginal Cancer](#)

## Stages and Outlook (Prognosis)

After cancer is diagnosed, staging provides important information about the amount of cancer in the body and the likely response to treatment.

- [Vaginal Cancer Stages](#)
- [Survival Rates for Vaginal Cancer](#)

## Questions to Ask About Vaginal Cancer

Here are some questions you can ask your cancer care team to help you better understand your cancer diagnosis and treatment options.

- [Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Vaginal Cancer](#)

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## Can Vaginal Cancer Be Found Early?

Sometimes vaginal cancer can be found early, when it's small and hasn't spread. It can cause [symptoms](#) that lead women to seek medical attention. But many vaginal cancers don't cause symptoms until they've grown and spread.

Pre-cancerous areas of vaginal intraepithelial neoplasia (VAIN) don't usually cause any symptoms.

Still, routine ob-gyn exams and [cervical cancer screening](#)<sup>1</sup> can sometimes find cases of VAIN and early invasive vaginal cancer.

### Hyperlinks

[www.cancer.org/cancer/t411\\_w\\_2x4\\_e/fd](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/t411_w_2x4_e/fd)

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## Signs and Symptoms of Vaginal Cancer

cancer have one or more symptoms, such as:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding (often after sex)
- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- A mass or lump in the vagina that can be felt
- Pain during sex

**Advanced vaginal cancer** has spread beyond the vagina to nearby structures and [lymph nodes](#)<sup>1</sup>. Symptoms of advanced vaginal cancer may be:

- Painful urination
- Constipation
- Pain in the pelvis or low in the belly
- Back pain
- Swelling in the legs

Having these symptoms does not always mean that you have cancer. In fact, these symptoms are more likely to be caused by something besides cancer, like an infection. The only way to know what's causing these problems is to see a health care professional.

If you have any of these symptoms, discuss them with a doctor right away. Remember, the sooner the problem is correctly diagnosed, the sooner you can start treatment, and the better the treatment will work.

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/lymph-nodes-and-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/lymph-nodes-and-cancer.html)



## Vaginal colposcopy (vaginocopy)

If your pelvic exam reveals a concerning finding or if your Pap test (a swab of cells from your cervix) is done and shows abnormal cells or you test positive for HPV (human papillomavirus), your doctor might suggest you have a test called a **colposcopy**. A colposcopy is typically done in a clinic, lasts less than 20 minutes, and you can go home the same day. You lie on the f cel ( )Tj 0 g /F1 12 Tf 5on the f cel ( )Tj 0 g ..62ome

that makes detailed cross-sectional images of your insides. Instead of taking one picture, like a standard x-ray, a CT scanner takes many pictures as it rotates around



These [endoscopy procedures](#)<sup>9</sup> are not used often for women with vaginal cancer, but they may be needed in certain cases.

### **Proctosigmoidoscopy**

This test may be done if the vaginal cancer is large and/or in the part of the vagina next to the rectum and colon. Proctosigmoidoscopy looks at the rectum and part of the colon. It's done to check for spread of vaginal cancer to these organs. In this procedure a thin, flexible, lighted tube is put into the rectum. The doctor can look closely at the inside of the rectum and the last part of the colon for cancer spread. Any areas that look suspicious will be biopsied. This test may be somewhat uncomfortable, but it should not be painful.

### **Cystoscopy**

Cystoscopy may be recommended if a vaginal cancer is large and/or is in the front wall of the vagina, near the bladder. This procedure allows the doctor to look at the inside of the bladder. It's done to check for spread of vaginal cancer to the bladder. It can be

## References

Adams TS, Rogers LJ, Cuello MA. Cancer of the vagina: 2021 update. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet.* 2021 Oct;155 Suppl 1(Suppl 1):19-27. doi: 10.1002/ijgo.13867. PMID: 34669198; PMCID: PMC9298013.

Gardner CS, Sunil J, Klopp AH, Devine CE, Sagebiel T, Viswanathan C, Bhosale PR. Primary vaginal cancer: role of MRI in diagnosis, staging and treatment. *Br J Radiol.* 2015 Aug;88(1052):20150033. doi: 10.1259/bjr.20150033. Epub 2015 May 12. PMID: 25966291; PMCID: PMC4651370.

National Comprehensive Cancer Network, Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology (NCCN Guidelines®), Vaginal Cancer, Version 1.2025 -- March 26, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.nccn.org> on May 28, 2024.

Society of Gynecologic Oncology. Vaginal Cancer. What tests might your gynecologic oncologist perform to determine treatment? Accessed at [www.sgo.org/patients-caregivers-survivors/patients/vaginal-cancer-what-tests-might-your-gynecologic-oncologist-perform/](http://www.sgo.org/patients-caregivers-survivors/patients/vaginal-cancer-what-tests-might-your-gynecologic-oncologist-perform/) on March 8, 2018.

Last Revised: June 18, 2024

# Vaginal Cancer Stages

- [How is the stage determined?](#)

After a woman is diagnosed with vaginal cancer, doctors will try to figure out if it has spread, and if so, how far. This process is called **staging**. The stage of a cancer describes how much cancer is in the body. It helps determine how serious the cancer is and how best to [treat](#)<sup>1</sup> it. Doctors also use a cancer's stage when talking about survival statistics.

Vaginal cancer stages range from stage I (1) through IV (4). As a rule, the lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, such as stage IV, means cancer has spread more. Although each person's cancer experience is unique, cancers





AJCC Stage	Stage grouping	FIGO Stage	Stage description*
IA	T1a	I	The cancer is only in the vagina and is no larger than 2 cm (4/5 inch) (T1a).  It has not spread to nearby lymph nodes (N0) or to distant sites (M0).
	N0		
	M0		
IB	T1b	I	The cancer is only in the vagina and is larger than 2.0 cm (4/5 inch) (T1b).  It has not spread to nearby lymph nodes (N0) or to distant sites (M0).
	N0		
	M0		
IIA	T2a	II	The cancer has grown through the vaginal wall, but not as far as the pelvic wall and is no larger than 2.0 cm (4/5 inch) (T2a).  It has not spread to nearby lymph nodes (N0) or to distant sites (M0).
	N0		
	M0		
IIB	T2b	II	The cancer has grown through the vaginal wall, but not as far as the pelvic wall and is larger than 2.0 cm (4/5 inch) (T2b).  It has not spread to nearby lymph nodes (N0) or to distant sites (M0).
	N0		
	M0		
III	T1 to T3	III	The cancer can be any size and might be growing into the pelvic wall and/or has blocked the flow of urine (hydronephrog /GS372 gs ( )Tj 0 g 1 0 0 BT 1 0 0 1 206.11 407.48 Tm F2 12
	N1		
	M0		



# Survival Rates for Vaginal Cancer

Survival rates can give you an idea of what percentage of people with the same type and stage of cancer are still alive a certain amount of time (usually 5 years) after they were diagnosed. They can't tell you how long you will live, but they may help give you a better understanding of how likely it is that your treatment will be successful.

**Keep in mind that survival rates are estimates and are often based on previous outcomes of large numbers of people who had a specific cancer, but they can't predict what will happen in any particular person's case. These statistics can be confusing and may lead you to have more questions. Ask your doctor how these numbers might apply to you.**

## What is a 5-year relative survival rate?

A **relative survival rate** compares women with the same type and stage of vaginal cancer to women in the overall population. For example, if the **5-year relative survival rate** for a specific stage of vaginal cancer is 80%, it means that people who have that cancer are, on average, about 80% as likely as people who don't have that cancer to live for at least 5 years after being diagnosed.

## Where do these numbers come from?

The American Cancer Society relies on information from the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) database, maintained by the National Cancer Institute (NCI), to provide survival statistics for different types of cancer.

The SEER database tracks 5-year relative survival rates for vaginal cancer in the United States, based on how far the cancer has spread. The SEER database, however, does not group cancers by [FIGO or AJCC TNM stages](#) (stage 1, stage 2, stage 3, etc.). Instead, it groups cancers into localized, regional, and distant stages:

- **Localized:** The cancer is limited to the vaginal wall.
- **Regional:** The cancer has spread through the vaginal wall to nearby structures or lymph nodes.
- **Distant:** The cancer has spread to distant parts of the body such as the lungs, liver or bones.

## 5-year relative survival rates for vaginal cancer

(These numbers are based on women diagnosed with vaginal cancer between 2012 and 2018.)

SEER* Stage	5-Year Relative Survival Rate
Localized	69%
Regional	57%
Distant	26%
All SEER stages combined	51%

\*SEER= Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results

### Understanding the numbers

- **These numbers apply only to the stage of the cancer when it is first diagnosed.** They do not apply later on if the cancer grows, spreads, or comes back after treatment.
- **These numbers don't take everything into account.** Survival rates are grouped based on how far the cancer has spread, but your age, overall health, [type of vaginal cancer](#)<sup>1</sup>, how well the cancer responds to treatment, and other factors can also affect your outlook.
- **People now being diagnosed with vaginal cancer may have a better outlook than these numbers show.** Treatments improve over time, and these numbers are based on people who were diagnosed and treated at least five years earlier.

### Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html)

### References

SEER\*Explorer: An interactive website for SEER cancer statistics [Internet]. Surveillance Research Program, National Cancer Institute. Accessed at <https://seer.cancer.gov/explorer/> on February 23, 2023.

Last Revised: March 1, 2023

# Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Vaginal Cancer

It's important to have honest, open talks with your cancer care team. They want to answer all of your questions, no matter how minor you might think they are. Here are some of the questions you might want to ask:

- What [kind of vaginal cancer](#)<sup>1</sup> do I have?
- Has the cancer spread beyond my vagina?
- What's the [stage](#) of the cancer? What does this mean to me?
- What [treatment choices](#)<sup>2</sup> do I have? What do you recommend? Why?

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/treating.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/treating.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/seeking-a-second-opinion.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/seeking-a-second-opinion.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/references.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/references.html)

**www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html**