

Cancer Glossary

Source: National Cancer Institute: What You Need to Know About Cancer

Adenoma (ad-in-OH-ma): A noncancerous tumor.

Adjuvant therapy (AD-joo-vant): 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.

Anesthesia (an-es-THEE-zha): Drugs or substances that cause loss of feeling or awareness. Local anesthetics cause loss of feeling in a part of the body. General anesthetics put the person to sleep.

Aromatase inhibitor (a-ROW-ma-tays in-HIB-it-er): A drug that prevents the formation of estradiol, a female hormone, by interfering with an aromatase enzyme. Aromatase inhibitors are used as a type of hormone therapy for postmenopausal women who have hormone-dependent breast cancer.

Benign (beh-NINE): Not cancerous. Benign tumors may grow larger but do not spread to other parts of the body.

Biological therapy (by-oh-LAH-jih-kul THAYR-uhpee): Treatment to stimulate or restore the ability of the immune system to fight cancer, infections, and other diseases. Also used to lessen side effects that may be caused by some cancer treatments. Also called immunotherapy, biotherapy, or biological response modifier (BRM) therapy.

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.

Bone scan: A technique to create images of bones on a computer screen or on film. A small amount of radioactive material is injected into a blood vessel and travels through the bloodstream; it collects in the bones and is detected by a scanner.

Brachytherapy (BRAKE-ih-THER-ah-pee): A procedure in which radioactive material sealed in needles, seeds, wires, or catheters is placed directly into or near a tumor. Also called internal radiation, implant radiation, or interstitial radiation therapy.

Cancer: A term for diseases in which abnormal cells divide without control. Cancer cells can invade nearby tissues and can spread through the bloodstream and lymphatic system to other parts of the body. 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 bloodstream. Lymphoma and multiple myeloma are cancers that begin in the cells of the immune system.

Carcinoma (KAR-si-NO-ma): Cancer that begins in the skin or in tissues that line or cover internal organs.

Carcinoma in situ (KAR-sih-NOH-ma in SYE-too): Cancer that involves only the cells in which it began and that has not spread to nearby tissues.

Catheter (KATH-i-ter): A flexible tube used to deliver fluids into or withdraw fluids from the body.

Cervical cancer (SER-vih-kul KAN-ser): Cancer that forms in tissues of the cervix (organ connecting the uterus and vagina). It is usually a slow-growing cancer that may not have symptoms, but can be found with regular Pap smears (procedure in which cells are scraped from the cervix and looked at under a microscope).

Chemotherapy (kee-moh-THAYR-uh-pee): Treatment with drugs that kill cancer cells.

Clinical trial: A type of research study that tests how well new medical approaches work in people. These studies test new methods of screening, prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of a disease. Also called a clinical study.

Colonoscopy (koh-luh-NAHS-kuh-pee): An examination of the inside of the colon using a thin, lighted tube (called a colonoscope) inserted into the rectum. Samples of tissue may be collected for examination under a microscope.

Colorectal cancer (KOH-loh-REK-tul KAN-ser): Cancer that develops in the colon (large intestine) and/or the rectum (the last several inches of the large intestine before the anus).

Complementary and alternative medicine: CAM. Forms of treatment that are used in addition to (complementary) or instead of (alternative) standard treatments. These practices generally are not considered standard medical approaches. CAM may include dietary supplements, megadose vitamins, herbal preparations, special teas, acupuncture, massage therapy, magnet therapy, spiritual healing, and meditation.

Contrast material: A dye or other substance that helps show abnormal areas inside the body. It is given by injection into a vein, by enema, or by mouth. Contrast material may be used with x-rays, CT scans, or other imaging tests.

Core biopsy: The removal of a tissue sample with a needle for examination under a microscope.

CT scan: Computed tomography 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 computerized tomography and computerized axial tomography (CAT) scan.

Cyst (sist): A sac or capsule in the body. It may be filled with fluid or other material.

Estrogen (ES-tro-jin): A hormone that promotes the development and maintenance of female sex characteristics.

External radiation (ray-dee-AY-shun): Radiation therapy that uses a machine to aim high-energy rays at the cancer. Also called external-beam radiation.

Fecal occult blood test (FEE-kul oh-KULT): FOBT. A test to check for blood in 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.

Gastroenterologist (GAS-troh-en-ter-AHL-oh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating disorders of the digestive system.

Gland: An organ that makes one or more substances, such as hormones, digestive juices, sweat, tears, saliva, or milk. Endocrine glands release the substances directly into the bloodstream. Exocrine glands release the substances into a duct or opening to the inside or outside of the body.

Gynecologist (guy-nuh-KAH-loh-jist): A doctor who specializes in treating diseases of the female reproductive organs.

Hodgkin's lymphoma: A malignant disease of the lymphatic system that is characterized by painless enlargement of lymph nodes, the spleen, or other lymphatic tissue. Other symptoms may include fever, weight loss, fatigue, or night sweats. Also called Hodgkin's disease.

Hormone: A chemical made by glands in the body. Hormones circulate in the bloodstream and control the actions of certain cells or organs. Some hormones can also be made in a laboratory.

Hormone receptor test: A test to measure the amount of certain proteins, called hormone receptors, in cancer tissue. Hormones can attach to these proteins. A high level of hormone receptors may mean that hormones help the cancer grow.

Hormone therapy: Treatment that adds, blocks, or removes hormones. For certain conditions (such as diabetes or menopause), hormones are given to adjust low hormone levels. To slow or stop the growth of certain cancers (such as prostate and breast cancer), synthetic hormones or other drugs may be given to block the body's natural hormones. Sometimes surgery is needed to remove the gland that makes hormones. Also called hormonal therapy, hormone treatment, or endocrine therapy.

Hysterectomy (hiss-ter-EK-toe-mee): Surgery to remove the uterus and, sometimes, the cervix. When the uterus and part or all of the cervix are removed, it is called a total hysterectomy. When only the uterus is removed, it is called a partial hysterectomy.

Imaging procedure: A method of producing pictures of areas inside the body.

Immune system (im-YOON): The complex group of organs and cells that defends the body against infections and other diseases.

Implant radiation (ray-dee-AY-shun): A procedure in which radioactive material sealed in needles, seeds, wires, or catheters is placed directly into or near a tumor. Also called brachytherapy, internal radiation, or interstitial radiation.

Internal radiation (ray-dee-AY-shun): A procedure in which radioactive material sealed in needles, seeds, wires, or catheters is placed directly into or near a tumor. Also called brachytherapy, implant radiation, or interstitial radiation therapy.

Laparoscopy (lap-uh-RAHS-koh-pee): The insertion of a thin, lighted tube (called a laparoscope) through the abdominal wall to inspect the inside of the abdomen and remove tissue samples.

Local therapy: Treatment that affects cells in the tumor and the area close to it.

Lumpectomy (lump-EK-toe-mee): Surgery to remove the tumor and a small amount of normal tissue around it.

Mammogram (MAM-o-gram): An x-ray of the breast.

Mastectomy (mas-TEK-toe-mee): Surgery to remove the breast (or as much of the breast tissue as possible).

Lymph node (limf node): A rounded mass of lymphatic tissue that is surrounded by a capsule of connective tissue. Lymph nodes filter lymph (lymphatic fluid), and they store lymphocytes (white blood cells). They are located along lymphatic vessels. Also called a lymph gland.

Lymphatic system (lim-FAT-ik SIS-tem): The tissues and organs that produce, store, and carry white blood cells that fight infections and other diseases. This system includes the bone marrow, spleen, thymus, lymph nodes, and lymphatic vessels (a network of thin tubes that carry lymph and white blood cells). Lymphatic vessels branch, like blood vessels, into all the tissues of the body.

Malignant (muh-LIG-nant): Cancerous. Malignant tumors can invade and destroy nearby tissue and spread to other parts of the body.

Medical oncologist (MEH-dih-kul on-KOL-oh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer using chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, and biological therapy. A medical oncologist often is the main health care provider for someone who has cancer. A medical oncologist also gives supportive care and may coordinate treatment given by other specialists.

Menopause (MEN-uh-pawz): The time of life when a woman's menstrual periods stop permanently. A woman is in menopause when she hasn't had a period for 12 months in a row. Also called "change of life."

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).

Metastasize (meh-TAS-ta-size): To spread from one part of the body to another. When cancer cells metastasize and form secondary tumors, the cells in the metastatic tumor are like those in the original (primary) tumor.

MRI: Magnetic resonance imaging (mag-NET-ik REZ-oh-nans IM-uh-jing). 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 CT or x-ray. MRI is especially useful for imaging the brain, spine, the soft tissue of joints, and the inside of bones. Also called nuclear magnetic resonance imaging.

Ovary (O-va-ree): One of a pair of female reproductive glands in which the ova, or eggs, are formed. The ovaries are located in the pelvis, one on each side of the uterus.

Pap test: 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 test can also show noncancerous conditions, such as infection or inflammation. Also called a Pap smear.

Pathologist (puh-THOL-oh-jist): A doctor who identifies diseases by studying cells and tissues under a microscope.

Primary tumor. The original tumor.

Progesterone (proh-JES-ter-own): A type of hormone made by the body that plays a role in the menstrual cycle and pregnancy. Progesterone can also be made in the laboratory. It may be used as a type of birth control and to treat menstrual disorders, infertility, symptoms of menopause, and other conditions.

Progestin (pro-JES-tin): Any natural or laboratorymade substance that has some or all of the biologic effects of progesterone, a female hormone.

Prostate (PRAHS-tayt): A gland in the male reproductive system. The prostate surrounds the part of the urethra (the tube that empties the bladder) just below the bladder, and produces a fluid that forms part of the semen.

Prostate-specific antigen: PSA. A substance produced by the prostate that may be found in an increased amount in the blood of men who have prostate cancer, benign prostatic hyperplasia, or infection or inflammation of the prostate.

Radiation oncologist (ray-dee-AY-shun on-KOLoh- jist): A doctor who specializes in using radiation to treat cancer.

Radiation therapy (ray-dee-AY-shun THAYR-uh-pee): The use of high-energy radiation from x-rays, gamma rays, neutrons, and other sources to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation may come from a machine outside the body (external-beam radiation therapy), or it may come from radioactive material placed in the body near cancer cells (internal radiation therapy, implant radiation, or brachytherapy). Systemic radiation therapy uses a radioactive substance, such as a radiolabeled monoclonal antibody, that circulates throughout the body. Also called radiotherapy.

Recurrence: Cancer that has returned after a period of time during which the cancer could not be detected. The cancer may come back to the same place as the original (primary) tumor or to another place in the body. Also called recurrent cancer.

Risk factor: Anything that increases a person's chance of developing a disease. Some examples of risk factors for cancer include a family history of cancer, use of tobacco products, certain foods, being exposed to radiation or other cancer-causing agents, and certain genetic changes.

Side effect. A problem that occurs when treatment affects healthy tissues or organs. Some common side effects of cancer treatment are fatigue, pain, nausea, vomiting, decreased blood cell counts, hair loss, and mouth sores.

Sigmoidoscopy (sig-MOY-DAHS-kuh-pee): Inspection of the lower colon using a thin, lighted tube called a sigmoidoscope. Samples of tissue or cells may be collected for examination under a microscope. Also called proctosigmoidoscopy.

Surgery (SER-juh-ree): A procedure to remove or repair a part of the body or to find out whether disease is present. An operation.

Systemic therapy (sis-TEM-ik THAYR-uh-pee): Treatment using substances that travel through the bloodstream, reaching and affecting cells all over the body.

Testosterone (tes-TOS-ter-own): A hormone that promotes the development and maintenance of male sex characteristics.

Tumor (TOO-mer): An abnormal mass of tissue that results when cells divide more than they should or do not die when they should. Tumors may be benign (not cancerous), or malignant (cancerous). Also called neoplasm.

Ultrasound (UL-truh-SOWND): A procedure in which high-energy sound waves (ultrasound) are bounced off internal tissues or organs and make echoes. The echo patterns are shown on the screen of an ultrasound machine, forming a picture of body tissues called a sonogram. Also called ultrasonography.

X-ray: A type of high-energy radiation. In low doses, x-rays are used to diagnose diseases by making pictures of the inside of the body. In high doses, x-rays are used to treat cancer.