

What is cancer?

Information for people affected by cancer.

We prepared this fact sheet to help you and your friends and family understand more about cancer. You will also learn what happens if your doctor tells you that you have cancer.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the cells. Cells are the basic building blocks of the human body. Our body is made up of lots of different types of cells like bone, skin and blood cells. The body constantly makes new cells to help us grow, replace old cells and heal injuries.

Sometimes this process goes wrong, and the cell becomes abnormal. The abnormal cell keeps dividing, making more abnormal cells.

The abnormal cells can gather together and form a lump called a tumour. There are two kinds of tumours:

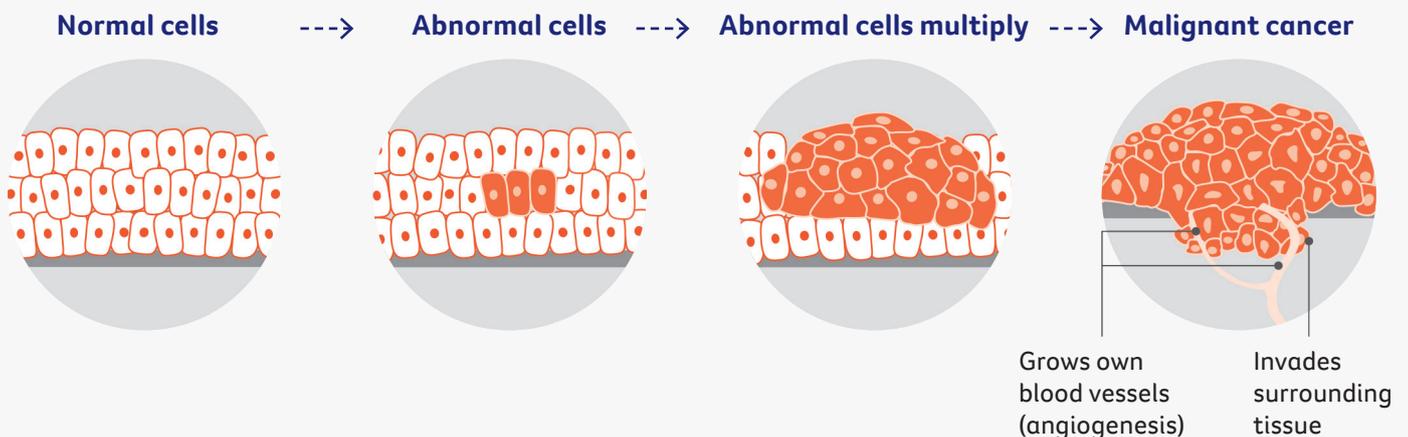
- **Benign** tumours are not cancer. They do not spread to other parts of the body.
- **Malignant** tumours are cancer. They can spread to other parts of the body.

Where can cancer start?

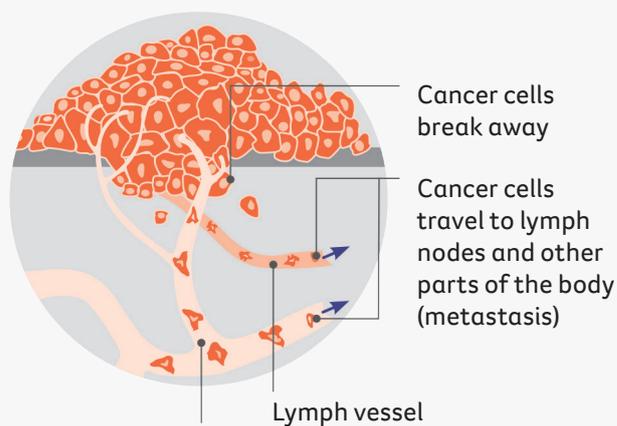
As our body is made up of cells, cancer can start anywhere in the body. Some common places for cancer to start include the skin, bowel, breasts, prostate and lungs.

The place where the cancer first starts is called 'primary cancer'. Sometimes the doctors can't find where the cancer first started. This is called 'cancer of unknown primary'.

How cancer starts



How cancer spreads



Can cancer spread?

Sometimes cancer cells move to other parts of the body. When this happens, we usually say that the cancer has spread.

Cancer that has spread and developed into a tumour somewhere else in the body is called a 'secondary cancer' or 'metastasis'.

How do you get cancer?

Cancer can happen to anybody. Some things put people at a greater risk of getting cancer:

- getting older (half of all cancers are diagnosed in people aged 75 or over)
- smoking tobacco
- drinking too much alcohol
- not doing enough exercise
- eating unhealthy food
- being overweight
- too much sun
- family history
- some chemicals and asbestos
- some viruses, such as the human papillomavirus (spread by sex).

Injury or stress does not cause cancer.

Cancer is not caused by being a bad person and it does not mean that you or your family are bad people.

Can you catch cancer from someone else?

No. Cancer is not contagious. People can't catch it from someone who has it. It is safe to be near someone who has cancer.

If you have cancer and think that people are afraid to be around you, they can call 13 11 20 to speak to a cancer nurse and talk about what worries them. For information in your own language call 13 14 50 and ask to speak to Cancer Council Victoria.

How common is cancer?

Cancer is common. Many cancers can be treated by a doctor if they are found early.

It is important to go to cancer screening programs. Screening for breast, bowel and cervical cancer saves lives because cancer can be found earlier, when it is easier to treat.

How is cancer found (diagnosed)?

Sometimes, doctors find cancer because the person is feeling unwell and has symptoms.

We can also find cancer during routine screening. This is when you have a test to check your health.

It is important to know what is normal for your body, and to see your doctor straight away if you notice changes like:

- lumps, sores or ulcers that don't heal
- breast changes:
 - lumpiness
 - a thickened area
 - unusual nipple discharge
 - a nipple that turns inwards
 - a change in shape or colour
 - pain
- skin changes: moles that change shape, size or colour, or bleed
- a cough that won't go away
- finding it hard to breathe or voice changes
- losing weight without trying
- nausea or vomiting that doesn't go away
- diarrhoea or constipation that doesn't go away or you can't explain
- for women, loss of blood from the vagina that is not normal, even if it's a few spots between periods or after menopause
- blood in your poo or wee
- unexplained pain in the body that does not get better.

Many of these symptoms can be caused by common health problems, not cancer. You should see a doctor about any changes or symptoms that don't go away.

What happens if I have cancer?

Cancer won't go away without treatment. The treatment depends on the type and stage of the cancer (how much it has grown and spread).

The most common cancer treatments are:

- chemotherapy
- radiation therapy
- surgery
- immunotherapy.

Your doctor will explain the options. Each person is different; some people have more than one type of treatment.

If the cancer is found early, it may be easier to treat. If we can't treat the cancer, it is possible that your doctor will give you a treatment to make you feel better (by controlling your symptoms). With these types of treatment, you might feel less pain and have a better life.

Acknowledgements

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This information is based on the expertise of clinicians who work in the area and consumer experience. Information for this fact sheet has been drawn from Cancer Council Australia information resources. This fact sheet was reviewed by Dr Karen Taylor, Radiation Oncologist, GenesisCare Radiation Oncology; Cecilia Barling, consumer; Clem Byard, 13 11 20 Cancer Council Victoria.

Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

For information and support contact a cancer nurse

 **13 11 20**

 **askanurse@cancervic.org.au**

 **www.cancervic.org.au**

 For other languages call **13 14 50**