

What is cancer?



Starting the conversation about cancer

If you ask everyone you know, “What is cancer?” you’ll probably get a different answer from everyone. Cancer is actually a collection of diseases, so there’s no single disease called “cancer.”¹ This is one reason that there are so many different impressions of the disease. Fear is another reason — a lot of people simply don’t like to talk about cancer.

When it comes to cancer, awareness is one of your strongest defenses. Which is why, in the weeks ahead, we want to open up a conversation about cancer.

Let’s start with a fairly basic definition of cancer. Most cancers share this characteristic: cancer starts as normal cells that begin to act in abnormal ways.

One of these abnormalities is that cancer cells don’t die like normal cells do. They either they don’t get, or they ignore, the message that tells them to die. Cell death is a natural process by which the body gets rid of unneeded cells. Instead, cancer cells continue replicating themselves — one cell divides and becomes two. Those two cells divide again and divide again.¹

And so, the cancer grows. Here are some other things to know about how cancer behaves:¹

- The human body is made up of trillions of cells, so cancer can start almost anywhere.
- Where normal cells are specialized, and have specific functions in the body, cancer cells don’t have specific functions. This is one reason they continue to divide without stopping.
- As cancer cells grow, they can form a malignant mass or tumor. Malignant tumors can invade surrounding tissues. Cancer that has a chance to spread beyond its point of origin is harder to treat.
- With some cancers, cells can break off from the original tumor and travel through the blood or the lymph system to invade another part of the body. This is called a metastatic tumor.

If you feel a mass

Fortunately, not all changes in the body's tissue are cancer. Not all cancers are characterized by hard masses or tumors, and not all tumors are malignant. So if you detect a mass, there is not a reason to automatically panic. However, you should see a doctor for further monitoring and examination to determine the cause of the mass. Depending on the situation, your doctor will run further tests, such as blood and urine tests, a biopsy or radiology imaging, such as a CT scan, MRI or X-ray.

If you suspect something is wrong

You should always report new or strange symptoms, including finding a mass, to your doctor so the issue can be properly evaluated and treated. Oftentimes, masses need observation and require minimal intervention. However, a serious diagnosis has a better chance of a positive outcome when found and treated early. In this cancer campaign, we focus on three cancers that can be detected early with the proper health education, awareness and/or screening. These cancers are breast, skin and colon cancer.

While researchers have uncovered an incredible amount about how cancer behaves, there's still so much that the medical community doesn't know, such as causes we don't understand or cures we don't have yet. But, what is known has the potential to save your life.

Sources:

1. World Health Organization. Cancer, February 3, 2022. Available from www.who.org.

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