

Understanding Common Cancer Words



When you're talking to your healthcare team, caregiver or loved ones, you may hear words that you don't understand. But it's important to know what these words mean to better understand living with cancer. Here is a list of cancer terms in notecard form, as well as a few blank cards, to print out and bring to your next appointment.

To look up words on your own, Cancer.gov has an online dictionary of cancer terms where you can search for words or look them up alphabetically. But remember to always ask your doctor to explain any words you don't know. Doctors are used to saying certain words and may not realize they're hard to understand. You are your own best advocate. You should have all the information you need to understand living with cancer.

BIOMARKERS

Cancer biomarkers are substances in your blood, tissues or other body fluids that can be used to help figure out the appropriate treatment for you.

BIOMARKER



BENIGN

When a tumor or growth is benign, it means that it is not cancerous. Another word that means the same thing as “benign” is “nonmalignant.”

BIOPSY

A biopsy is a procedure performed by a doctor where cells or tissue is removed from the body and looked at to find out if a disease, such as cancer, is there. If the cells are cancerous, the biopsy results can show what type of cancer it is.

BIOPSY



CLINICAL TRIALS

Clinical trials are research studies that involve people. Through clinical trials, doctors determine whether new medical approaches are safe and effective.

GRADE

Cancer grade is based on how different the tumor cells and tissue look compared to normal cells and tissue under a microscope. “Low grade” usually means the cancer cells look close to normal and tend to grow and spread slowly.

A cancer’s “grade” is different from its “stage,” which measures how far the cancer has spread.

STAGE

Cancer stage describes how much cancer is in the body and how far it has spread. The staging is usually based on tumor size, whether lymph nodes contain cancer and whether the cancer has spread from its original location. A cancer’s “stage” is different from its “grade,” which measures how abnormal the tumor cells and tissue look.

IMAGING

Imaging is a way to take pictures of the inside of the body to help screen for cancer, diagnose, plan treatment, see how a treatment is working or monitor cancer. Examples of imaging tests include x-rays, computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), positron emission tomography (PET) and ultrasounds.



X-RAY



MRI/PET/CT



ULTRASOUND

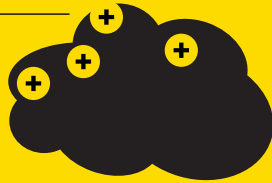
LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is lymph fluid build-up in tissues that may cause swelling. This may happen if the lymph nodes are damaged or removed as part of cancer treatment or because of the cancer itself.

MALIGNANT

A malignant tumor means that cancer cells have been found inside the tumor.

CANCER DETECTED



MARGINS

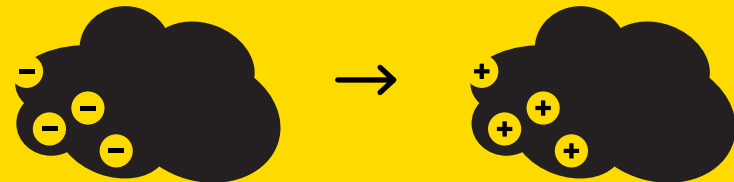
Margins refer to the tissue around a tumor after it has been removed. If the margin is “negative,” this means it’s likely that all the cancer has been removed. If the margin is “positive,” this means not all the cancer has been removed.

METASTASIS

Metastasis happens when cancer spreads from where it first started to another part of the body. Even though it’s in another part of the body, it’s still the same kind of cancer, so the name doesn’t change. It is also referred to as “metastatic cancer.”

RECURRENCE

Recurrence is when cancer returns after some time.



REMISSION

Remission occurs when there is a decrease in the signs and symptoms of cancer. There are two types of remission—partial and complete.

PARTIAL REMISSION

Partial remission means that some signs and symptoms of cancer have disappeared.

COMPLETE REMISSION

Complete remission means all signs and symptoms of cancer have disappeared, although cancer still may be in the body.

TREATMENT CYCLE

A period of treatment followed by a period of rest (no treatment) that is repeated on a schedule.

TUMOR

A tumor is a lump of tissue inside the body that forms when cells grow more than they should or aren't dying when they should. A tumor may be benign or malignant.

TUMOR