

» GLOSSARY OF THE MOST COMMON CANCER-RELATED TERMINOLOGY USED BY A HEALTHCARE TEAM

ADRENAL GLAND: Two glands, located near the kidneys, which produce hormones that control metabolism, fluid balance, and blood pressure. They also produce small amounts of “male” hormones (androgens) and “female” hormones (estrogens and progesterone).

ADVANCED CANCER: A general term describing later stages of cancer (usually stage 3 or 4) in which the disease has spread from the *primary site* (where it started) to other parts of the body. When the cancer has spread only to nearby areas, it is called *locally advanced*. If it has spread to distant parts of the body, it is called *metastatic*.

ALOPECIA: Hair loss, usually temporary. This is a side effect of some chemotherapy drugs or radiation.

ANEMIA: Having too few red blood cells (“low blood”). This may be a complication of the cancer or a side effect of treatment. Symptoms of anemia include feeling tired, weak, and short of breath.

ANESTHESIA: The loss of feeling or sensation caused by drugs or gases. *General anesthesia* causes loss of consciousness (“puts you under”). *Local or regional anesthesia* numbs only a certain area.

ANTIEMETIC: A medicine that prevents or controls nausea and vomiting

ASYMPTOMATIC: No symptoms present. Cancer is often asymptomatic in its early stages. Screening tests help to find these early cancers when the chance for cure is usually highest.

ATYPICAL: Cancerous or precancerous cells that have an unusual or abnormal appearance

AXILLARY: In the armpit (in cancer, usually refers to lymph nodes)

BENIGN: Describes a tumor that is not cancerous. Benign tumors typically grow, but they do not spread the way cancer does, and they are usually not a threat to life.

BENIGN PROSTATIC HYPERPLASIA (BPH): A noncancerous enlargement of the prostate that may cause problems with urination such as trouble starting and stopping the flow

BLOOD CELL COUNTS: The number of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in a sample of blood. The test that measures this is called a *CBC* (complete blood count).

BONE MARROW: The inner, spongy tissue of bones where blood cells are made

BRONCHI: The two main air passages in the lungs that lead from the windpipe (*trachea*). The bronchi provide a passage for air to move in and out of the lungs.

CANCER: A general term for more than 100 diseases in which abnormal cells grow out of control. Also used to refer to a malignant (cancerous) tumor.

CARCINOGEN: Any substance that causes cancer or helps cancer grow (e.g., tobacco smoke contains many carcinogens that greatly increase the risk of lung cancer)

CATHETER: A thin, flexible tube used to introduce fluids into the body or to remove fluids from the body

CELL: The basic unit of which all living things are made. Cells replace themselves by dividing and forming new cells. The processes that control the formation of new cells and the death of old cells are disrupted in cancer.

CENTRAL VENOUS CATHETER (CVC): A special thin, flexible tube placed in a large vein, usually in the chest, neck, or upper arm. It can remain there for as long as it is needed to deliver and withdraw fluids.

CERVIX: The narrow, lower end of the womb (uterus) that opens into the vagina

CHROMOSOMES: Threadlike bodies that carry genetic information. They are found in the nucleus, or center part, of a cell.

CLINICAL TRIALS: Medical research studies conducted with volunteers. Each study is designed to answer scientific questions and to find better ways to detect, prevent, or treat cancer.

COMBINATION CHEMOTHERAPY: The use of more than one drug to treat cancer

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM): Nonconventional ways of dealing with disease. This covers a broad range, such as herbs/vitamins/minerals, mind/body/spirit therapy, diet and nutrition, physical touch, and biological methods.

DYSPHAGIA: Having trouble swallowing or eating

DYSPLASIA: Abnormal development of tissue

EDEMA: Build up of fluid in the tissues, causing swelling or puffiness

EMESIS: Vomiting

ENDOCRINE GLANDS: Glands that release hormones into the bloodstream. The ovaries are one type of endocrine gland.

ENDOMETRIUM: The lining of the womb (uterus)

GASTROINTESTINAL TRACT: The digestive tract. It consists of organs and structures that process and prepare food to be used as energy (e.g., stomach, small intestine, large intestine).

GROWTH FACTORS: Substances that stimulate production of blood cells in the bone marrow. Also known as colony-stimulating factors, they can help the blood-forming tissue recover from the effects of chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

HEMATURIA: Blood in the urine

HORMONES: Natural substances released by an organ that can influence the function of other organs in the body and the growth of some types of cancer

HOSPICE: A special kind of care for people in the final phase of illness, their families, and caregivers. The care may take place in the patient's home or in a homelike facility.

IMMUNE SYSTEM: The complex system by which the body resists infection by germs such as bacteria or viruses and rejects transplanted tissues or organs. The immune system may also help the body fight some cancers.

INGUINAL: In the groin (in cancer, usually refers to lymph nodes)

INTRA-ARTERIAL: Into an artery

INTRACAVITARY: Into a cavity or space, especially the abdomen, pelvis, or chest

INTRALESIONAL: Into a tumor

INTRAMUSCULAR (IM): Into a muscle

INTRATHECAL (IT): Into the spinal fluid (also called cerebrospinal fluid or CSF)

INTRAVENOUS (IV): Into a vein

LEUKOCYTES: White blood cells

LUMP: Any kind of mass in the breast or elsewhere in the body

LYMPH NODES: Small bean-shaped collections of immune system tissue, found along lymphatic vessels that form a network through the body. The *lymphatic system* circulates a fluid called *lymph*, which contains white blood cells called *lymphocytes*. The nodes remove cell waste, germs, and other harmful substances from lymph. They help fight infections and also have a role in fighting cancer, although cancers sometimes spread through them.

LYMPHOCYTES: A type of white blood cell found in the lymphatic system

MALIGNANT: Cancerous

METASTASIS/METASTASIZED: The spread of cancer cells to distant areas of the body through the lymphatic system or bloodstream

NECROSIS: The death of living tissues. *Necrotic* refers to tissue that has died.

NEOPLASM: A collection of abnormal cells that multiply unchecked by normal processes of cell death and destruction. The resulting tissue growth is a tumor. This term is usually used as a synonym for cancer.

NEUROPATHY: Nerve abnormality or damage which causes numbness, tingling, pain, muscle weakness, or even swelling. There are various causes of neuropathy, including some cancers and some cancer therapies.

NEUTROPHILS: The most common type of white blood cell. These cells are essential for fighting infections. The *neutrophil count* (ANC) is an important measure of the body's ability to resist infection. A low neutrophil count is called *neutropenia*.

NODULE: A small, solid lump that can be located by touch

ORALLY (PO): Taken by mouth

PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY: A condition of the nervous system that usually begins in the hands and/or feet with symptoms of numbness, tingling, burning, and/or weakness. Can be caused by certain chemotherapy drugs.

PLATELETS: Special blood cells that help blood clot, to plug up damaged blood vessels and stop bleeding

POLYP: A mushroom-like growth in the mucous membrane that lines many hollow organs such as the rectum, the uterus, and the nose. Some polyps are precancerous.

PREDISPOSITION: Susceptibility to a disease that can be triggered under certain conditions. For example, some women have a family history of breast cancer and are therefore more likely (but not necessarily destined) to develop breast cancer.

PRIMARY SITE: The place where cancer begins. Primary cancer is usually named after the organ in which it starts. For example, cancer that starts in the breast is always breast cancer even if it spreads (metastasizes) to other organs such as bones or lungs.

PRIMARY TREATMENT: The first, and usually the most important, treatment

PROSTHESIS: An artificial form to replace a part of the body that is removed, such as a breast or a leg

RADIATION DOSE: The amount of radiation an object (such as human tissue) receives. Radiation is delivered in various units, such as gray, rad, rem, or sievert.

RADIOISOTOPE: A type of atom that is unstable and prone to break apart (decay). Decay releases small fragments of atoms and energy. Exposure to certain radioisotopes can cause cancer. But ra-

di isotopes are also used to find and treat cancer. In certain imaging procedures, for example, radioisotopes are injected into the body where they then collect in areas where the disease is active, showing up as highlighted areas on the images.

RECURRENCE: The return of cancer after treatment. *Local recurrence* means that the cancer has come back at the same place as the original cancer. *Regional recurrence* means that the cancer has come back after treatment in the lymph nodes near the primary site. *Distant recurrence* is when cancer metastasizes after treatment to distant organs or tissues (e.g., lungs, liver, bone marrow, brain).

RED BLOOD CELLS (RBCS): Cells that carry oxygen from the lungs to tissues throughout the body

REGIMEN: A strict, regulated plan designed to treat cancer

RELAPSE: Reappearance of cancer after a disease-free period

REMISSION: The partial or complete disappearance of signs and symptoms of disease

RISK FACTOR: Anything that is related to a person's chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. For example, unprotected exposure to strong sunlight is a risk factor for skin cancer; smoking is a risk factor for lung, mouth, larynx, and other cancers. Some risk factors, such as smoking, can be controlled. Others, such as age, can't be changed.

SCREENING: The search for disease, such as cancer, in people without symptoms. For example, screening measures for prostate cancer include digital rectal examination and the PSA blood test; for breast cancer, mammograms and clinical breast exams. Screening may refer to coordinated programs in large groups of people.

SECONDARY TUMOR: A tumor that forms as a result of spread (metastasis) of cancer from the place where it started

SHUNT: A hole or passage that allows movement of fluid from one part of the body to another. For example, a cerebral shunt is used in cases of hydrocephalus (excess fluid in the brain) as a one-way valve to drain excess cerebrospinal fluid from the brain and carry it to other parts of the body. The cerebral shunt is placed by a surgeon, usually outside the skull but beneath the skin, somewhere behind the ear.

SIDE EFFECTS: Unwanted effects of treatment. Examples include hair loss caused by chemotherapy and fatigue caused by radiation therapy.

STAGING: The process of finding out whether cancer has spread and, if so, how far; that is, to learn the stage of the cancer. Various staging systems are in use for staging different types of cancer. The most commonly used is the TNM system.

STENT: A device that is inserted to support and hold open a tube-shaped organ, such as a blood vessel or intestine, after surgery

STOMATITIS: Sores on the inside of the mouth, usually a side effect of therapy

SUPRACLAVICULAR: Just above the collarbone, or clavicle (usually refers to lymph nodes)

SYSTEMIC: Treatment that reaches and affects cells throughout the body (e.g., chemotherapy)

SYSTEMIC DISEASE: In cancer, when a tumor that originated in one place has spread to distant organs or structures

TNM STAGE: A system for denoting the stage of a cancer by its size and the extent of regional spread (e.g., to lymph nodes) and distant metastasis

TOPICAL: Applied directly to the skin

TOXICITY: The harmful effects of a medication or treatment, especially at higher doses

TUMOR: An abnormal growth (lump or mass) of cells or tissues. Tumors are either benign (noncancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

UNILATERAL: Affecting one side of the body. For example, unilateral breast cancer occurs in one breast only.

VACCINE: A modified version of a germ or other substance related to a disease, usually given in injection. It stimulates the immune system to bring about resistance to that disease for a period of time, or even permanently.

WATCHFUL WAITING: Close monitoring as an alternative to active treatment. This treatment strategy is used often in prostate cancer; it may be a reasonable choice for older men with small tumors that might grow very slowly. If the situation changes, active treatment can be started.

WHITE BLOOD CELLS (WBCS): The blood cells that fight infection. There are several types of white blood cells. Certain cancer treatments such as chemotherapy can reduce the number of these cells and make a person more likely to get infections.