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If You Have Thyroid Cancer

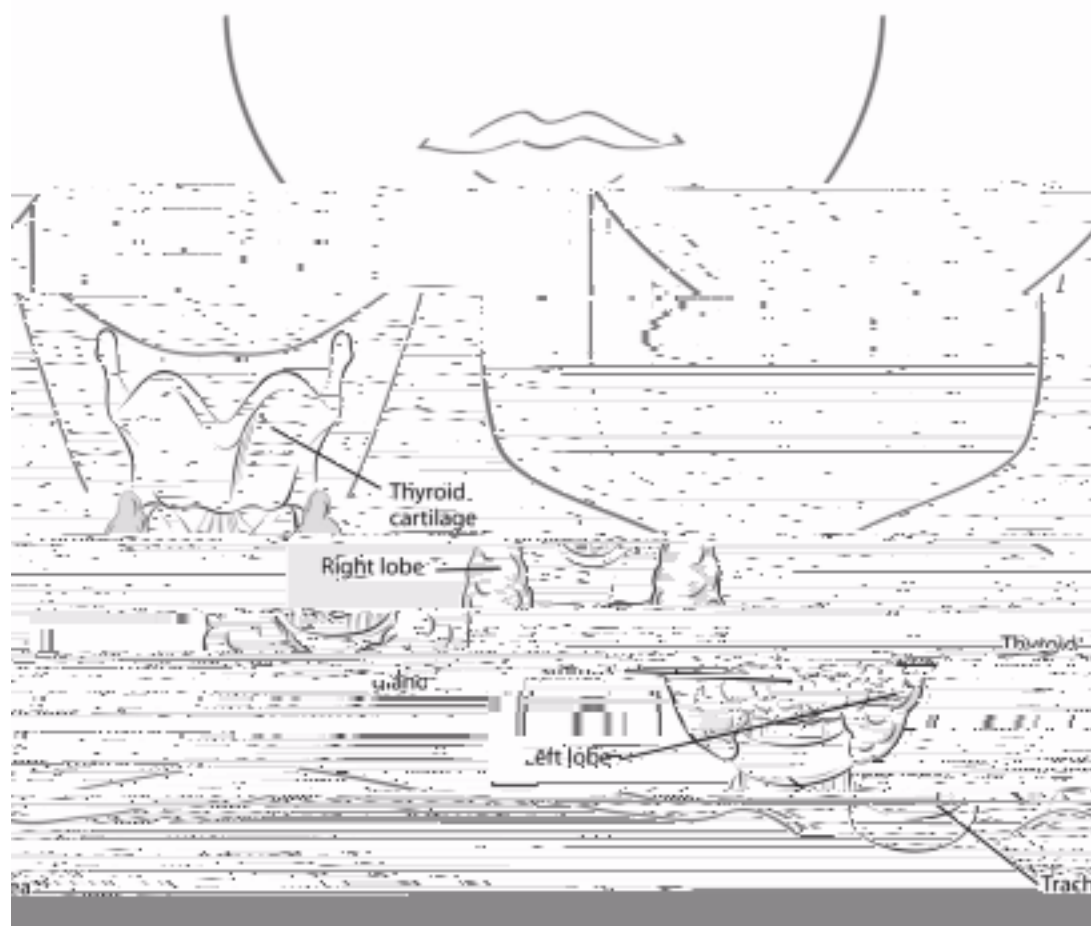
If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, this guide can help.

- [What is thyroid cancer?](#)
- [How does the doctor know I have thyroid cancer?](#)
- [How serious is my cancer?](#)
- [What kind of treatment will I need?](#)
- [What will happen after treatment?](#)

What is thyroid cancer?

Thyroid cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the thyroid gland. It happens when cells in the thyroid grow out of control and crowd out normal cells.

Sometimes thyroid cancer spreads to other parts of the body, such as the lungs, and grows there. When cancer does this, it's called **metastasis**. Even if thyroid cancer spreads to the lungs (or any other place), it's still thyroid cancer.



The thyroid

Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where your cancer is.

The thyroid gland

The thyroid gland is below the Adam's apple (**thyroid cartilage**) in the front of the neck. In most people, you can't see or feel the thyroid. It's butterfly shaped, with 2 sides called **lobes**. A thin piece of thyroid tissue called the **isthmus** connects the lobes.

The thyroid gland makes hormones that help control heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, and weight.

Types of thyroid cancer

There are 4 main [types of thyroid cancer](#)¹. They are listed below. Your doctor can tell

The echoes are made into a picture on a computer screen. How a lump looks on ultrasound can sometimes help doctors figure out if it's cancer. But an ultrasound alone can't tell for sure.

Radioiodine scan: For this test, a low dose of radioactive iodine (called I-131) is swallowed or put into a vein. Over time, the iodine is absorbed by your thyroid cells. A special camera is then used to see the radioactivity. Thyroid nodules that have less iodine than the rest of the thyroid can sometimes be cancer.

CT or CAT scan: This is a special kind of x-ray test that makes detailed pictures of your thyroid. It can also show if the cancer has spread.

MRI scan: This test makes pictures using radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays. MRI scans can be used to look for cancer in the thyroid, or cancer that has spread.

PET scan: In this test, you are given a special type of sugar that can be seen inside your body with a camera. If there is cancer, this sugar shows up as "hot spots" where the cancer is found. This test can be useful if your thyroid cancer doesn't take up radioactive iodine.

Thyroid biopsy: In a biopsy, the doctor takes out a small piece of tissue to check it for cancer cells. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if you have cancer.

The most common kind of thyroid biopsy is a **fine needle aspiration (FNA)**. To do this, the doctor puts a thin, hollow needle into the nodule to take out some cells and a few drops of fluid. These are then tested for cancer. If the diagnosis is not clear after an FNA biopsy, you might need another kind of biopsy to get more cells to test.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do we need to do next?

How serious is my cancer?

If you have thyroid cancer, your doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called [staging](#)³. Figuring out the stage of your cancer helps your doctor decide what type of treatment is best for you.

The stage describes the size of the cancer in your thyroid gland. It also describes if the cancer has spread to nearby areas, or to other organs farther away.

Your cancer can be stage 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means a more advanced cancer. Be sure to ask the doctor about your cancer stage and what it means for you.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage?
- What does the stage mean in my case?
- Based on the stage of the cancer, what treatment options are best for me?
- What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many [ways to treat thyroid cancer](#)⁴, but surgery is the main treatment. The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- The type of thyroid cancer you have
- The stage of the cancer
- Your age and overall health
- The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
- Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that might come with it

Depending on the type and stage of your g /F2 12 Tf 0 0 0 hl

Side effects of surgery

Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Be sure to ask your doctor what you can expect. Possible side effects of thyroid surgery include:

- Infection
- Bleeding or a blood clot in the neck
- Damage to the parathyroid glands (small glands that sit behind the thyroid)
- Problems with your voice (short or long-term)
- Low thyroid hormone levels. If so, you'll need to take thyroid replacement therapy. (see below)

Radioactive iodine treatment (RAI)

Your thyroid gland absorbs nearly all the iodine in your body. When a high dose of radioactive iodine (RAI), also called I-131, is taken into your body, it collects in thyroid cells. The radiation then destroys the cells, including the ones that are cancer. This type of radiation doesn't have much effect on the rest of your body.

Side effects of RAI

Common side effects of RAI treatment are:

- Neck soreness and swelling
- Nausea and vomiting
- Swollen and sore salivary glands
- Dry mouth
- Taste changes
- Problems with tears (such as dry eyes)

Radiation treatments

Radiation uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. This treatment is sometimes used to kill any cancer cells that might be left after surgery.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, talk about what side effects might happen. Side effects depend on the type of radiation that's used. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Dry mouth
- Hoarse voice
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)

Most side effects get better after treatment ends. Some might last longer. Talk to your cancer care team about what you can expect.

Chemo

Chemo is short for chemotherapy, the use of drugs to fight cancer. These drugs go into the blood and spread through the body. Chemo is given in cycles or rounds. Each round of treatment is followed by a break. Most of the time, 2 or more chemo drugs are given. Treatment often lasts for many months.

Chemo is not often used to treat thyroid cancer.

Side effects of chemo

Chemo can make you feel very tired and sick to your stomach. It can also cause your hair to fall out. But these problems tend to go away after treatment ends.

There are ways to treat most chemo side effects. If you have side effects, be sure to talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

Targeted drugs

Some newer, targeted drugs may be used for certain types of thyroid cancer. This is not the same as chemo because these drugs mainly affect cancer cells and not the normal cells in your body. They may work even if other treatments don't. Your doctor might test your cancer cells to see if one of these drugs could help you.

Side effects of targeted drugs

The side effects of targeted drugs depend on which drug is used. Common side effects can include:

- High blood pressure
- Fatigue (feeling tired)
- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Rash

Thyroid hormone replacement

If your thyroid gland is taken out with surgery or destroyed with radiation, you will need to take thyroid hormone pills to replace the missing thyroid hormones your body needs.

Taking higher doses of thyroid hormone may also help keep some kinds of thyroid cancer from coming back.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with other treatments that may be better.

Clinical trials are one way to get the newest cancer treatment. They are also the best way for doctors to find better ways of treating cancer. If your doctor can find a clinical trial for your kind of cancer, it's your choice whether to take part in it. If you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

If you would like to be in a clinical trial, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital does clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials](#)⁵ to learn more.

What about other treatments I've heard of?

When you have cancer, you might hear about other ways to treat the cancer or treat your symptoms. These may not always be standard medical treatments. These treatments may be [vitamins, herbs, special diets, and other things](#)⁶.

Some of these might help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown *not* to help. A few have even been found harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking of using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What treatment do you think is best for me?

For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/about/what-is-thyroid-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/how-diagnosed.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/treating.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/after-treatment.html
8. www.cancer.org

Words to know

Anaplastic carcinoma (an-UH-plas-tik CAR-sin-O-ma): A rare, fast-growing type of thyroid cancer in which the cancer cells look very different from normal thyroid cells.

Biopsy (BY-op-see): Taking out small pieces of body tissue to see if they have cancer cells.

Follicular carcinoma (fuh-LIH-kyoo-ler CAR-sin-O-ma): Cancer that starts in follicular cells in the thyroid. It tends to grow slowly.

Lobectomy (low-BEK-tuh-me): Surgery to remove a lobe (part) of an organ, such as one lobe of the thyroid.

Lymph (limf) nodes: Small, bean-shaped collections of immune cells found all over the body and connected by lymph vessels; also called lymph glands.

Medullary carcinoma (MED-yoo-LAYR-ee CAR-sin-**O**-ma): Cancer that starts in the C-cells of the thyroid. The C-cells make a hormone called calcitonin (cal-suh-TOE-nin) that helps keep a healthy level of calcium in the blood.

Metastasis (meh-TAS-tuh-sis): Spread of cancer from where it started to other places in the body.

Nodule (NOD-yool): A small lump in the thyroid that can be felt or seen on an imaging test.

Papillary carcinoma: (PA-pih-LAYR-ee CAR-sin-**O**-ma): The most common type of thyroid cancer. It tends to grow slowly, often in 1 lobe of the thyroid.

Thyroidectomy (THY-roy-**DEK**-toh-mee): Surgery to remove the thyroid gland.

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org⁸. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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