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If You Have Vaginal Cancer

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What is vaginal cancer?

Cancer can start any place in the body. Vaginal cancer starts in the vagina. It starts when cells in the vagina grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. Cancer cells in the vagina can sometimes travel to the lungs and grow there. When cancer cells do this, it's called metastasis. To doctors, the cancer cells in the new place look just like the ones from the vagina.

Cancer is always named for the place where it starts. So if vaginal cancer spreads to the lungs (or any other place), it's still called vaginal cancer. It's not called lung cancer unless it starts from cells in the lung.



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

The vagina

The vagina starts at the cervix (the lower part of the uterus) and opens at the vulva (the outer female genitals). The vagina is usually collapsed with its walls touching each other. The vaginal walls have many folds that help the vagina open and expand during sex or the birth of a baby.

Different kinds of vaginal cancer

There are a few [kinds of vaginal cancer](#)¹. Your doctor can tell you more about the kind you have.

The most common kind is called squamous cell carcinoma. This kind starts in the cells that line the inside of the vagina.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Why do you think I have cancer?
- Is there a chance I don't have cancer?
- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- What will happen next?

[Radiation](#)⁶ is the main treatment for most women. It uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells.

Radiation can be aimed at the vagina and/or lymph nodes from a machine outside the body. This is called external beam radiation.

Radiation can also be given by putting a tube of radiation in the vagina. This is called internal radiation or brachytherapy.

Many times, both types of radiation are used.

Sometimes this treatment is given along with chemo to help shrink a tumor so it's easier to take it out with surgery. This is called chemoradiation.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, talk about what side effects might happen. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired
- Loose stools
- Vaginal scarring, pain, and dryness

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

Surgery

[Surgery](#)⁷ can be used to treat vaginal cancer. If you need it, ask your doctor what type you'll need. There are many kinds of surgery. The type used depends on where the cancer is and how big it is. Some types of surgery 0 0 17ktsk the way your body

expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat women with vaginal cancer should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

Chemo

[Chemo](#)⁸ is the short word for chemotherapy, the use of drugs to fight cancer. The drugs are often given through a needle into a vein. These drugs go into the blood and spread through the body.

Chemo is not a common treatment for vaginal cancer. But it may be used if the cancer

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking about 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?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
- What will the surgery be like?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- What will these treatments be like?
- What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?
- What can I do about side effects that I might have?
- Will I be able to have children after treatment?
- Will I be able to enjoy sex after treatment?
- Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?
- What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if they are safe?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- What should I do to be ready for treatment?

us at 1-800-227-2345 or talk to your doctor to find out what you can do to feel better.

You can't change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making healthy choices and feeling as good as you can.

[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/vaginal-cancer/about/what-is-vaginal-cancer.html
 2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vaginal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html
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cancers are carcinomas.

Cervix (SER-vix): The lower part of the uterus (YEW-tuh-rus). It connects the uterus to the vagina.

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

Metastasis (meh-TAS-tuh-sis): Cancer cells that have spread from where they started to other places in the body.

Pap test: Also called a **Pap smear**. A test in which cells are scraped from a woman's cervix and checked for cancer or pre-cancer cells.

Uterus (YEW-tuh-rus): Also called the womb. The pear-shaped organ in a woman's pelvis that holds the growing baby.

Vagina (vuh-JIE-nuh): The passage leading from the vulva (the female genital organs that are on the outside of the body) to the uterus (the womb).

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org¹². 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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