



CANCER

Stages of Cancer

When you are diagnosed with cancer, your health team needs to figure out the “stage” of the cancer. The stage describes where a cancer is located and if it has spread. In most cases, testing is required to determine a cancer’s stage. Knowing the stage helps the doctor:

- Plan treatment (such as surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy)
- Predict whether the cancer might come back after treatment
- Predict your chance of recovery

The first step in defining your cancer is to classify it with the “TNM” system.

The “TNM” system

The TNM system is used to classify cancers such as breast, colon, and lung cancers that form solid tumours. Cancers of the blood (such as leukemia), central nervous system tumours (such as brain cancers), and childhood cancers have different staging systems.

T: The letter “T” plus a number (0 to 4) describes the size and location of the tumours, including how far the tumours have grown into nearby tissues.

N: The letter “N” plus a number (0 to 3) describes whether cancer is in the lymph nodes and, in some types of cancer, how many lymph nodes contain cancer.

M: The letter “M” plus a number (0 or 1) indicates whether the cancer has metastasized (spread) to other parts of the body.



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Cancer stage grouping

Doctors determine the stage of a cancer by combining the T, N and M classifications.

Most cancers have 4 stages: stages I (one) to IV (four). Some cancers also have a stage 0 (zero).

Stage 0 cancers are still located in the place they started and have not invaded nearby tissues. This stage of cancer is often highly curable, usually by removing the entire tumour with surgery.

Stage I is usually a small cancer or tumour that has not grown deeply into nearby tissues and has not spread to the lymph nodes or other parts of the body. It is often called early-stage cancer.

Stage II and III cancers or tumours are larger in size, have grown more deeply into nearby tissue, and have spread to lymph nodes, but not to other parts of the body.

Stage IV cancer has spread to other organs or parts of the body. It may also be called advanced or metastatic cancer.

Other factors

Doctors use other factors to decide on treatment and predict how the disease will progress:

- **Grade**, which describes how different the cells look compared to healthy cells
- **Tumour markers**, which are substances particular to certain types of cancer
- **Genetic markers**, which relate to particular genes involved in a cancer

Find out more about your diagnosis and treatment

The Canadian Cancer Society website cancer.ca has detailed information about the different kinds of cancer, their diagnosis and treatment.