



Patient education: Brain cancer (The Basics)

What is brain cancer?

Brain cancer happens when normal cells in the brain change into abnormal cells and grow out of control. There are different types of brain cancer. Some types grow very slowly. Others grow much faster.

As brain cancer grows, it can spread into normal parts of the brain. It can also cause swelling in the brain. These can cause symptoms.

What are the symptoms of brain cancer?

Often, one of the first symptoms of brain cancer is a seizure. Seizures are caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain. A seizure can cause a person to:

- Suddenly have trouble speaking or understanding
- Stare off into space
- Lose control of an arm or a leg
- Pass out
- Stiffen and then have jerking movements of the arms or legs
- Lose muscle control throughout the body

Other symptoms of brain cancer can include:

- Headache, often with nausea or vomiting
- Vision changes, such as double vision or a loss of vision
- Memory problems or having trouble thinking clearly
- Weakness or numbness in the arms or legs
- Personality changes

These symptoms can also be caused by conditions that are not brain cancer. But you should let your doctor or nurse know if you have any of these symptoms.

Is there a test for brain cancer?

Yes. Doctors use imaging tests such as CT or MRI scans to diagnose brain cancer. These tests create images of your brain, and can show tumors or abnormal growths.

After an imaging test, your doctor might follow up with another test called a biopsy. During a biopsy, a doctor takes a very small sample of the brain tissue. He or she will look at the sample under a microscope to see if cancer is present.

The right treatment for you will depend a lot on the type of brain cancer you have, and how fast the cancer is growing. Your treatment will also depend on your symptoms, age, and other health problems.

How is brain cancer treated?

Different treatments can include:

- **Surgery** – During surgery, doctors try to remove as much of the cancer as possible. Often, brain cancer cannot be cured with surgery, but surgery might reduce symptoms and help people live longer. On the other hand, surgery can also lead to more symptoms or problems. This is because healthy parts of the brain can be damaged during surgery. How much cancer can be removed depends on where the cancer is in the brain.
- **Radiation therapy** – Radiation kills cancer cells. People might receive radiation therapy after surgery, or when surgery is not possible.
- **Chemotherapy** – Chemotherapy is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing. People might receive these medicines during or after radiation therapy to keep the cancer from growing, spreading, or coming back.
- **Electrical device** – In some cases, people with certain kinds of brain cancer might be able to try treatment with a device they wear on their head. The device creates a special type of electricity, which might help slow down cancer growth.

People with brain cancer also receive treatment for any symptoms they have. For example, people might take medicines to control seizures.

What happens after treatment?

After treatment, you will be checked every so often to see if the cancer comes back. Follow up tests usually include imaging tests. You should watch for the symptoms listed above, because having those symptoms could mean the cancer has come back. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any symptoms.

What happens if the cancer comes back or spreads?

If the cancer comes back or spreads, you might have more surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation.

What else should I do?

It is important to follow all your doctors' instructions about visits and tests. It's also important to talk to your doctor about any side effects or problems you have during treatment.

Getting treated for brain cancer involves making many choices, such as what treatment to have and when.

Always let your doctors and nurses know how you feel about a treatment. Any time you are offered a treatment, ask:

- What are the benefits of this treatment? Is it likely to help me live longer? Will it reduce or prevent symptoms?
 - What are the downsides to this treatment?
 - Are there other options besides this treatment?
 - What happens if I do not have this treatment?
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