

SU FAMILIA: THE NATIONAL HISPANIC FAMILY HEALTH HELPLINE 1.866.SU.FAMILIA (783.2645)

CANCER

WHAT IS CANCER?

Cancer is a term that refers to the unrestricted growth and division of cells, resulting in a mass of cells called a tumor. As the tumor grows, it may invade and destroy nearby cells, tissues, and organs.

There are two kinds of tumors: **benign** and **malignant**. A benign tumor is **not** cancer. Some of the more common types of benign tumors are polyps (small growths) and cysts (liquid filled sacs). Neither cysts nor polyps spread to other parts of your body.

If a tumor is made up of cells that divide rapidly in ways that are not normal, it is a malignant tumor. A malignant tumor **is** cancer. Much of the concern about cancer is related to whether cancer cells in the tumor have traveled to other parts of the body.

Metastasis is the word used to refer to the stage when cancer cells are found in other parts of your body. Cancer cells can spread to nearby lymph nodes, organs, and other structures. Cells may spread further throughout the body by using the bloodstream or the lymphatic system as a freeway.

WHAT IS A RISK FACTOR?

A risk factor is not something that causes the disease but instead is a factor which promotes the appearance of a disease, usually in combination with other factors. For example, although smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer, other factors such as genetic structure and asbestos exposure also play a role. While a family history of cancer is a risk factor, you should also remember that most people with a family history of cancer will not develop cancer.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO PREVENT CANCER?

There are risk factors associated with cancer that we can all work to avoid by changing certain behaviors. You should eat a diet that is low in fat and high in fiber. You should avoid smoking cigarettes, and excessive alcohol consumption. You should also avoid prolonged, frequent, and intense exposure to sunlight, and exposure to chemical substances.

WHY IS EARLY DETECTION OR DIAGNOSIS IMPORTANT?

With early detection and treatment you can survive cancer and have a full and active life. Regardless of the area of the body where cancer develops, the earlier the cancer is detected, the greater the chance of successful treatment with less toxic methods. Scientific advances have also increased the survival from cancers that are diagnosed at later stages.

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HOW IS CANCER DIAGNOSED?

In most cases, the first step in diagnosing cancer involves getting a small sample of the material that forms the cancerous area or tumor so it can be carefully examined. This is referred to as a **biopsy**. A biopsy requires the removal of part of the cancerous material or tumor. This material is sent to a laboratory to determine whether cancerous cells are present. If they are present, the next step is to determine:

- ▶ The type of cancer.
- ▶ Whether the cancer is found in other tissue.
- ▶ Whether hormones encourage its growth (this will help determine the type of medication you may receive to decrease the size of the tumor).
- ▶ The tumor's rate of growth (if the cancer is growing rapidly, it will be more susceptible to chemotherapy).

The stage of cancer is determined by the size of the tumor and the extent to which cancer cells are found in surrounding areas. For each type of cancer, the stage or extent of the disease has its own implication with respect to the choice of treatment and the likelihood of success. It is essential to get a second opinion about your treatment so that you can have a broader perspective about your treatment options.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Cancer Society
1-800-227-2345
<http://www.cancer.org>

CancerNet (A Service of the National Cancer Institute)
<http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Cancer Prevention and Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer>

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
<http://www.cancer.gov>

National Alliance for Hispanic Health
Su Familia: The National Hispanic Family Health Helpline 1-866-Su-Familia (783-2645)
<http://www.hispanichealth.org>