

List of Cancer Terms

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ablation

In medicine, the removal or destruction of a body part or tissue or its function. Ablation may be performed by surgery, hormones, drugs, radiofrequency, heat, or other methods.

adjuvant therapy

Treatment given after the primary treatment to increase the chances of a cure. Adjuvant therapy may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, or biological therapy.

ADL

Activities of daily living. The tasks of everyday life. Basic ADLs include eating, dressing, getting into or out of a bed or chair, taking a bath or shower, and using the toilet. Instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) are activities related to independent living and include preparing meals, managing money, shopping, doing housework, and using a telephone. Also called activities of daily living.

advance directive

A legal document that states the treatment or care a person wishes to receive or not receive if he or she becomes unable to make medical decisions (for example, due to being unconscious or in a coma). Some types of advance directives are living wills and do-not-resuscitate (DNR) orders.

AJCC staging system

A system developed by the American Joint Committee on Cancer for describing the extent of cancer in a patient's body. The descriptions include TNM: T describes the size of the tumor and if it has invaded nearby tissue, N describes any lymph nodes that are involved, and M describes metastasis (spread of cancer from one body part to another).

allergic response

A hypersensitive immune reaction to a substance that normally is harmless or would not cause an immune response in everyone. An allergic response may cause harmful symptoms such as itching or inflammation or tissue injury.

alopecia

The lack or loss of hair from areas of the body where hair is usually found. Alopecia can be a side effect of some cancer treatments.

analgesia

Pain relief.

anastomosis

A procedure to connect healthy sections of tubular structures in the body after the diseased portion has been surgically removed.

anemia

A condition in which the number of red blood cells is below normal.

anticoagulant

A drug that helps prevent blood clots from forming. Also called a blood thinner.

antiemetic

A drug that prevents or reduces nausea and vomiting.

benign

Not cancerous. Benign tumors may grow larger but do not spread to other parts of the body

bilateral

Affecting both the right and left sides of the body.

biopsy

The removal of cells or tissues for examination by a pathologist. The pathologist may study the tissue under a microscope or perform other tests on the cells or tissue. When only a sample of tissue is removed, the procedure is called an incisional biopsy. When an entire lump or suspicious area is removed, the procedure is called an excisional biopsy. When a sample of tissue or fluid is removed with a needle, the procedure is called a needle biopsy, core biopsy, or fine-needle aspiration.

blood

A tissue with red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, and other substances suspended in fluid called plasma. Blood takes oxygen and nutrients to the tissues, and carries away wastes.

blood clot

A mass of blood that forms when blood platelets, proteins, and cells stick together. When a blood clot is attached to the wall of a blood vessel, it is called a thrombus. When it moves through the bloodstream and blocks the flow of blood in another part of the body, it is called an embolus.

bone marrow biopsy

The removal of a sample of tissue from the bone marrow with a needle for examination under a microscope.

bone metastasis

Cancer that has spread from the original (primary) tumor to the bone.

brachytherapy

A type of radiation therapy in which radioactive material sealed in needles, seeds, wires, or catheters is placed directly into or near a tumor. Also called radiation brachytherapy, internal radiation therapy, and implant radiation therapy.

brain metastasis

Cancer that has spread from the original (primary) tumor to the brain.

breakthrough pain

Intense increases in pain that occur with rapid onset even when pain-control medication is being used. Breakthrough pain can occur spontaneously or in relation to a specific activity.

CAM

Complementary and alternative medicine. Forms of treatment that are used in addition to (complementary) or instead of (alternative) standard treatments. These practices generally are not considered standard medical approaches. Standard treatments go through a long and careful research process to prove they are safe and effective, but less is known about most types of CAM. CAM may include dietary supplements, megadose vitamins, herbal preparations, special teas, acupuncture, massage therapy, magnet therapy, spiritual healing, and meditation. Also called complementary and alternative medicine.

cancer

A term for diseases in which abnormal cells divide without control. Cancer cells can invade nearby tissues and can spread to other parts of the body through the blood and lymph systems. There are several main types of cancer. Carcinoma is cancer that begins in the skin or in tissues that line or cover internal organs. Sarcoma is cancer that begins in bone, cartilage, fat, muscle, blood vessels, or other connective or supportive tissue. Leukemia is cancer that starts in blood-forming tissue such as the bone marrow, and causes large numbers of abnormal blood cells to be produced and enter the blood. Lymphoma and multiple myeloma are cancers that begin in the cells of the immune system. Central nervous system cancers are cancers that begin in the tissues of the brain and spinal cord.

central venous access catheter (CVC)

A tube surgically placed into a blood vessel for the purpose of giving intravenous fluid and drugs. It also can be used to obtain blood samples. This device avoids the need for separate needle insertions for each infusion or blood test. Examples of these devices include Hickman catheters, which require clamps to make sure the valve is closed, and Groshong catheters, which have a valve that opens as fluid is withdrawn or infused and remains closed when not in use.

chemoembolization

A procedure in which the blood supply to the tumor is blocked surgically or mechanically and anticancer drugs are administered directly into the tumor. This permits a higher concentration of drug to be in contact with the tumor for a longer period of time.

chemotherapy

Treatment with drugs that kill cancer cells.

clinical trial

A type of research study that tests how well new medical approaches work in people. These studies test new methods of screening, prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of a disease. Also called a clinical study.

complete blood count

CBC. A test to check the number of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in a sample of blood. Also called blood cell count and CBC.

computed tomography scan

CT scan. A series of detailed pictures of areas inside the body taken from different angles; the pictures are created by a computer linked to an x-ray machine. Also called CT scan, computerized tomography, computerized axial tomography scan, and CAT scan.

cytology

The study of cells using a microscope.

do not resuscitate order

DNR order. A type of advance directive in which a person states that healthcare providers should not perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (restarting the heart) if his or her heart or breathing stops. Also called DNR order.

durable power of attorney

DPA. A type of power of attorney. A power of attorney is a legal document that gives one person (such as a relative, lawyer, or friend) the authority to make legal, medical, or financial decisions for another person. It may go into effect right away, or when that person is no longer able to make decisions for himself or herself. A durable power of attorney remains in effect until the person who grants it dies or cancels it. It does not need to be renewed over time. Also called DPA.

echocardiography

Echo. A procedure that uses ultrasonic waves directed over the chest wall to obtain a graphic record of the heart's position, motion of the walls, or internal parts such as the valves.

electrolyte

A substance that breaks up into ions (electrically charged particles) when it is dissolved in body fluids or water. Some examples of electrolytes are sodium, potassium, chloride, and calcium. Electrolytes are primarily responsible for the movement of nutrients into cells and the movement of wastes out of cells.

external-beam radiation therapy

A type of radiation therapy that uses a machine to aim high-energy rays at the cancer from outside of the body. Also called external radiation therapy.

family history

A record of a person's current and past illnesses, and those of his or her parents, brothers, sisters, children, and other family members. A family history shows the pattern of certain diseases in a family, and helps to determine risk factors for those and other diseases.

fatigue

A condition marked by extreme tiredness and inability to function due lack of energy. Fatigue may be acute or chronic.

fecal occult blood test

FOBT. A test to check for blood in the stool. Small samples of stool are placed on special cards and sent to a doctor or laboratory for testing. Blood in the stool may be a sign of colorectal cancer. Also called FOBT.

fluoroscopy

An x-ray procedure that makes it possible to see internal organs in motion.

Gamma Knife therapy

A treatment using gamma rays, a type of high-energy radiation that can be tightly focused on small tumors or other lesions in the head or neck, so very little normal tissue receives radiation. The gamma rays are aimed at the tumor from many different angles at once, and deliver a large dose of radiation exactly to the tumor in one treatment session. This procedure is a type of stereotactic radiosurgery. Gamma Knife therapy is not a knife and is not surgery. Gamma Knife is a registered trademark of Elekta Instruments, Inc.

genetic testing

Analyzing DNA to look for a genetic alteration that may indicate an increased risk for developing a specific disease or disorder.

grade

The grade of a tumor depends on how abnormal the cancer cells look under a microscope and how quickly the tumor is likely to grow and spread. Grading systems are different for each type of cancer.

growth factor

A substance made by the body that functions to regulate cell division and cell survival. Some growth factors are also produced in the laboratory and used in biological therapy.

histologic examination

The examination of tissue specimens under a microscope.

imaging

Tests that produce pictures of areas inside the body.

immunocompromised

Having a weakened immune system caused by certain diseases or treatments.

infection

Invasion and multiplication of germs in the body. Infections can occur in any part of the body and can spread throughout the body. The germs may be bacteria, viruses, yeast, or fungi. They can cause a fever and other problems, depending on where the infection occurs. When the body's natural defense system is strong, it can often fight the germs and prevent infection. Some cancer treatments can weaken the natural defense system.

laboratory test

A medical procedure that involves testing a sample of blood, urine, or other substance from the body. Tests can help determine a diagnosis, plan treatment, check to see if treatment is working, or monitor the disease over time.

liver function test

LFTs. A blood test to measure the blood levels of certain substances released by the liver. A high or low level of certain substances can be a sign of liver disease.

liver metastasis

Cancer that has spread from the original (primary) tumor to the liver.

lymph node dissection

A surgical procedure in which the lymph nodes are removed and examined to see whether they contain cancer. For a regional lymph node dissection, some of the lymph nodes in the tumor area are removed; for a radical lymph node dissection, most or all of the lymph nodes in the tumor area are removed. Also called lymphadenectomy.

magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

A procedure in which radio waves and a powerful magnet linked to a computer are used to create detailed pictures of areas inside the body. These pictures can show the difference between normal and diseased tissue. MRI makes better images of organs and soft tissue than other scanning techniques, such as computed tomography (CT) or x-ray. MRI is especially useful for imaging the brain, the spine, the soft tissue of joints, and the inside of bones. Also called MRI, nuclear magnetic resonance imaging, and NMRI.

malignant

Cancerous. Malignant tumors can invade and destroy nearby tissue and spread to other parts of the body.

metastasis

The spread of cancer from one part of the body to another. A tumor formed by cells that have spread is called a "metastatic tumor" or a "metastasis." The metastatic tumor

contains cells that are like those in the original (primary) tumor. The plural form of metastasis is metastases (meh-TAS-tuh-SEEZ).

micrometastasis

Small numbers of cancer cells that have spread from the primary tumor to other parts of the body and are too few to be picked up in a screening or diagnostic test.

Mohs surgery

A surgical procedure used to treat skin cancer. Individual layers of cancerous tissue are removed and examined under a microscope one at a time until all cancerous tissue has been removed. Also called Mohs micrographic surgery.

monoclonal antibody

A type of protein made in the laboratory that can locate and bind to substances in the body and on the surface of cancer cells. There are many kinds of monoclonal antibodies; each one is made to find a different substance. Monoclonal antibodies are being used to treat some types of cancer and are being studied in the treatment of other types. They can be used alone or to carry drugs, toxins, or radioactive materials directly to a tumor.

multidisciplinary

In medicine, a term used to describe a treatment planning approach or team that includes a number of doctors and other health care professionals who are experts in different specialties (disciplines). In cancer treatment, the primary disciplines are medical oncology (treatment with drugs), surgical oncology (treatment with surgery), and radiation oncology (treatment with radiation).

myelosuppression

A condition in which bone marrow activity is decreased, resulting in fewer red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. Myelosuppression is a side effect of some cancer treatments. When myelosuppression is severe, it is called myeloablation.

needle biopsy

The removal of tissue or fluid with a needle for examination under a microscope. Also called fine-needle aspiration.

neutrophil

A type of white blood cell.

nuclear medicine scan

A method of diagnostic imaging that uses very small amounts of radioactive material. The patient is injected with a liquid that contains the radioactive substance, which collects in the part of the body to be imaged. Sophisticated instruments detect the radioactive substance in the body and process that information into an image.

OTC

A medicine that can be bought without a prescription (doctor's order). Examples include analgesics (pain relievers) such as aspirin and acetaminophen. Also called nonprescription and over-the-counter.

pathology report

The description of cells and tissues made by a pathologist based on microscopic evidence, and sometimes used to make a diagnosis of a disease.

PCA

Patient-controlled analgesia. A method of pain relief in which the patient controls the amount of pain medicine that is used. When pain relief is needed, the person can receive a preset dose of pain medicine by pressing a button on a computerized pump that is connected to a small tube in the body.

performance status

A measure of how well a patient is able to perform ordinary tasks and carry out daily activities.

PET scan

Positron emission tomography scan. A procedure in which a small amount of radioactive glucose (sugar) is injected into a vein, and a scanner is used to make detailed, computerized pictures of areas inside the body where the glucose is used. Because cancer cells often use more glucose than normal cells, the pictures can be used to find cancer cells in the body. Also called positron emission tomography scan.

port-a-cath

An implanted device through which blood may be withdrawn and drugs may be infused without repeated needle sticks. Also called a port.

prophylactic

In medicine, something that prevents or protects.

PSA

Prostate-specific antigen. A substance produced by the prostate that may be found in an increased amount in the blood of men who have prostate cancer, benign prostatic hyperplasia, or infection or inflammation of the prostate.

quality of life

The overall enjoyment of life. Many clinical trials assess the effects of cancer and its treatment on the quality of life. These studies measure aspects of an individual's sense of well-being and ability to carry out various activities.

radiation therapy

The use of high-energy radiation from x-rays, gamma rays, neutrons, protons, and other sources to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation may come from a machine outside the body (external-beam radiation therapy), or it may come from radioactive

material placed in the body near cancer cells (internal radiation therapy). Systemic radiation therapy uses a radioactive substance, such as a radiolabeled monoclonal antibody, that travels in the blood to tissues throughout the body. Also called radiotherapy and irradiation.

remission

A decrease in or disappearance of signs and symptoms of cancer. In partial remission, some, but not all, signs and symptoms of cancer have disappeared. In complete remission, all signs and symptoms of cancer have disappeared, although cancer still may be in the body.

renal function test

A test in which blood or urine samples are checked for the amounts of certain substances released by the kidneys. A higher- or lower-than-normal amount of a substance can be a sign that the kidneys are not working the way they should. Also called kidney function test.

risk factor

Something that may increase the chance of developing a disease. Some examples of risk factors for cancer include age, a family history of certain cancers, use of tobacco products, certain eating habits, obesity, lack of exercise, exposure to radiation or other cancer-causing agents, and certain genetic changes.

screening

Checking for disease when there are no symptoms.

sentinel lymph node biopsy

Removal and examination of the sentinel node(s) (the first lymph node(s) to which cancer cells are likely to spread from a primary tumor). To identify the sentinel lymph node(s), the surgeon injects a radioactive substance, blue dye, or both near the tumor. The surgeon then uses a scanner to find the sentinel lymph node(s) containing the radioactive substance or looks for the lymph node(s) stained with dye. The surgeon then removes the sentinel node(s) to check for the presence of cancer cells.

side effect

A problem that occurs when treatment affects healthy tissues or organs. Some common side effects of cancer treatment are fatigue, pain, nausea, vomiting, decreased blood cell counts, hair loss, and mouth sores.

staging

Performing exams and tests to learn the extent of the cancer within the body, especially whether the disease has spread from the original site to other parts of the body. It is important to know the stage of the disease in order to plan the best treatment.

standard of care

In medicine, treatment that experts agree is appropriate, accepted, and widely used. Health care providers are obligated to provide patients with the standard of care. Also called standard therapy or best practice.

stem cell

A cell from which other types of cells develop. Blood cells develop from blood-forming stem cells.

stereotactic biopsy

A biopsy procedure that uses a computer and a 3-dimensional scanning device to find a tumor site and guide the removal of tissue for examination under a microscope.

survivorship

In cancer, survivorship covers the physical, psychosocial, and economic issues of cancer, from diagnosis until the end of life. It includes issues related to the ability to get health care and follow up treatment, late effects of treatment, second cancers, and quality of life.

symptom

An indication that a person has a condition or disease. Some examples of symptoms are headache, fever, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and pain.

targeted therapy

A type of treatment that uses drugs or other substances, such as monoclonal antibodies, to identify and attack specific cancer cells without harming normal cells.

thrombocytopenia

A decrease in the number of platelets in the blood that may result in easy bruising and excessive bleeding from wounds or bleeding in mucous membranes and other tissues.

tumor board review

A treatment planning approach in which a number of doctors who are experts in different specialties (disciplines) review and discuss the medical condition and treatment options of a patient. In cancer treatment, a tumor board review may include that of a medical oncologist (who provides cancer treatment with drugs), a surgical oncologist (who provides cancer treatment with surgery), and a radiation oncologist (who provides cancer treatment with radiation). Also called a multidisciplinary opinion.

tumor marker

A substance sometimes found in the blood, other body fluids, or tissues. A high level of tumor marker may mean that a certain type of cancer is in the body. Examples of tumor markers include CA 125 (ovarian cancer), CA 15-3 (breast cancer), CEA (ovarian, lung, breast, pancreas, and gastrointestinal tract cancers), and PSA (prostate cancer). Also called biomarker.

ultrasound

A procedure in which high-energy sound waves (ultrasound) are bounced off internal tissues or organs and make echoes. The echo patterns are shown on the screen of an ultrasound machine, forming a picture of body tissues called a sonogram. Also called ultrasonography.

WBC

White blood cell. Refers to a blood cell that does not contain hemoglobin. White blood cells include lymphocytes, neutrophils, eosinophils, macrophages, and mast cells. These cells are made by bone marrow and help the body fight infections and other diseases. Also called white blood cell.

x-ray

A type of high-energy radiation. In low doses, x-rays are used to diagnose diseases by making pictures of the inside of the body. In high doses, x-rays are used to treat cancer.