

Early-stage Cancer Care: Patient Resource

Supporting patients and their whānau to understand
an early-stage cancer diagnosis





Introduction

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be an overwhelming and distressing experience, filled with lots of emotions and questions. This booklet aims to provide valuable information and support for patients and their whānau (family) during their journey with early-stage cancer.

The booklet outlines the basics of:

- Understanding the different stages of cancer
- Pathways following an early-stage diagnosis
- Benefits versus risks of early-stage cancer treatment



It's a good idea to ask questions and seek support from your healthcare team, whānau, and fellow patients.

Understanding the different stages of cancer

Firstly, let's explain what cancer staging is. **Cancer staging is a way for doctors to describe the size and location of the cancer (or tumour), whether it has spread to nearby tissues or lymph nodes, and if it has spread to other organs.** It also helps doctors know how to best treat the cancer and what the outlook or prognosis might be.¹

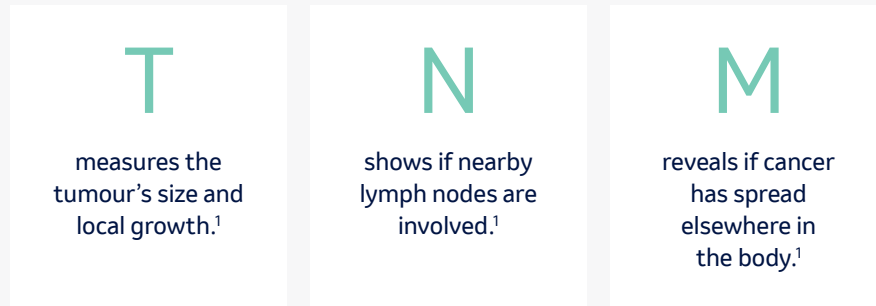
To determine the stage, doctors use various tests such as imaging scans, biopsies, as well as physical exams and information from your medical history.¹

Doctors will then stage the cancer. Many different cancer staging systems are used. The TNM staging system is the most widely used; however, others are specific to a particular type of cancer.²

Ask your doctor about the type of staging system that is used for your cancer type.

— TNM staging

The TNM staging system is used for most types of cancers.¹ This system uses letters and numbers to describe how the cancer has grown and spread.¹



Higher numbers mean more growth or spread.¹

— Cancer stage grouping

Using the information collected to establish the TNM stage, the doctor will assign a specific stage to the cancer.¹ Most types of cancer are grouped into stages, numbered from 1 to 4 (See Figure 1) with some starting at Stage 0.¹

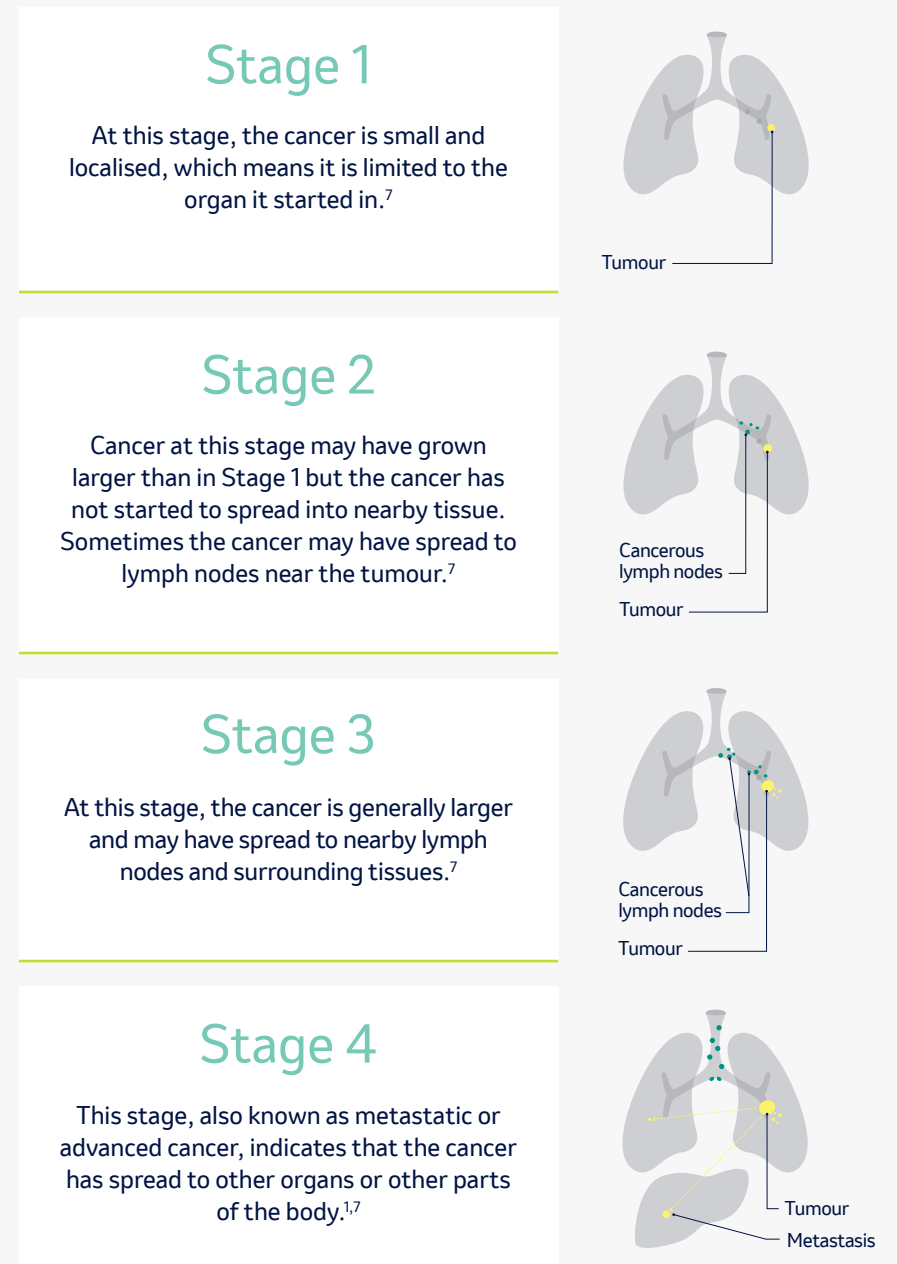
It's important to note that some cancers use different staging systems, which may have differences in how stages are defined and named.²

— Early-stage cancer

Early-stage cancer is used to describe cancer that is early in its growth, before it has spread to other parts of the body.^{3,4} Generally, Stage 4 cancers and some Stage 3 cancers are considered more advanced stages and not classified as early-stage cancers.^{5,6}

Everyone's situation is unique, so your doctor will explain your specific cancer stage and what it means for you.

Figure 1: the stages of cancer^{1,7*}



*The images are examples of stages in lung cancer.⁸⁻¹¹

Pathways following an early-stage cancer diagnosis

Once your cancer has been staged, this information will help you and your doctors decide which pathway is best suited for you.¹

In some early-stage cancers, treatment may not be done immediately and instead the doctors will monitor the cancer.¹²

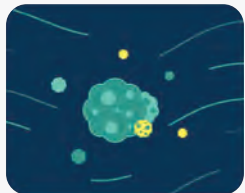
An **'active surveillance'** approach means doctors monitor certain slow-growing cancers with regular tests and check-ups, and treatment is not required at the time.¹³⁻¹⁵

Alternatively, **'watchful waiting'** is a more passive approach for slow-growing cancers. It focuses on managing symptoms and providing supportive care as required, without regular monitoring.¹⁵

Treatment for early-stage cancers commonly involves surgery and this may be the only form of treatment you require.¹⁶

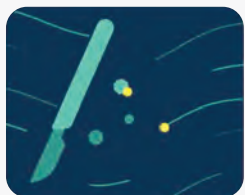
Other types of early-stage treatment (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or hormone therapy) may be used before surgery (neoadjuvant treatment), during surgery (simultaneous treatment), or after surgery (adjuvant treatment).¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Your healthcare team will guide you through your journey. They are there to answer questions and provide support throughout.



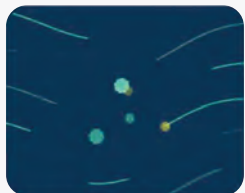
Neoadjuvant treatment

Neoadjuvant treatment is given before surgery with the aim of shrinking the tumour to make it easier to remove by surgery.¹⁶



Surgery

Surgery is a procedure to remove the part of the body containing the cancer.¹⁶



Adjuvant treatment

Adjuvant treatment is given after surgery with the aim to remove any remaining cancer cells. This may help to lower the risk of cancer returning in the future.^{16,17}



Benefits versus risks of early-stage cancer treatment

Your healthcare team may outline some of the possible treatment options for you, as well as the potential risks (or side effects), the duration and frequency of treatment, the potential impact on your quality of life and the potential benefits of each option.



Don't be shy about asking questions. The more you know, the better you can decide what's best for you.

When cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, when it is not too big and has not spread, it is more likely to be treated successfully.³

Detecting and treating cancer early may help:



Reduce the risk of the cancer coming back^{4,19}



Increase the potential for long-term survival³

— Side effects of cancer surgery

Your recovery after surgery will vary depending on your age, surgery type, and your overall health. It may take a few days to recover from a smaller operation while it could take a few months following a complex procedure. It is important to follow the advice of your surgeon and to take the time to fully recover.¹⁶

— Side effects of cancer drug treatment

You may experience side effects while undergoing cancer treatment.

Most side effects get better within the first few weeks or months of treatment;²⁰ however, you may experience side effects later in your treatment course or even after treatment has ended.²⁰



If you have concerns about your recovery after surgery, or you notice any side effects of treatment, it's important to let your healthcare team know.

Private versus public treatment options



Your healthcare team will talk with you and your whānau about the treatment options available and whether they are funded (available for free) or only available privately (paid for by you). This will help you and your whānau consider the options available to decide which is the most suitable treatment for you.

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