



## **Metastatic Cancer**

**SANFORD<sup>®</sup>**  
CANCER CENTER

## What is Metastatic Cancer?

The main reason that cancer is so serious is its ability to spread. Metastatic (Meh ta stat ik) cancer is the name for cancer that spreads to another part of the body. For many types of cancer, it is also called stage IV (4) cancer. The process by which cancer cells spread to other parts of the body is called metastasis.

When observed under a microscope and tested in other ways, metastatic cancer cells have features like that of the primary cancer. It is not like the cells in the place where the cancer is found. This is how doctors can tell that it is cancer that has spread from another part of the body.

Metastatic cancer has the same name as the primary cancer. For example, breast cancer that spreads to the lung is called metastatic breast cancer, not lung cancer. It is treated as stage IV breast cancer, not as lung cancer.

Sometimes when people are diagnosed with metastatic cancer, doctors cannot tell where it started. This type of cancer is called cancer of unknown primary origin, or CUP. When a new primary cancer occurs in a person with a history of cancer, it is known as a second primary cancer. Second primary cancers are rare. Most of the time, when someone who has had cancer has cancer again, it means the first primary cancer has returned.

## How Cancer Spreads

Cancer cells spread through the body in a series of steps. These steps include:

1. Growing into, or invading, nearby normal tissue
2. Moving through the walls of nearby lymph nodes or blood vessels
3. Traveling through the lymphatic system and bloodstream to other parts of the body
4. Stopping in small blood vessels at a distant location, invading the blood vessel walls, and moving into the surrounding tissue
5. Growing in this tissue until a tiny tumor forms
6. Causing new blood vessels to grow, which creates a blood supply that allows the tumor to continue growing

## Symptoms of Metastatic Cancer

Metastatic cancer does not always cause symptoms. When symptoms occur, the way you feel depends on the size and location of the metastatic tumors. Some common signs of metastatic cancer include:

- Pain and fractures – when cancer has spread to the bone
- Headache, seizures, or dizziness – when cancer has spread to the brain
- Shortness of breath – when cancer has spread to the lung
- Jaundice or swelling in the belly – when cancer has spread to the liver

## Where Cancer Spreads

Cancer can spread to most any part of the body, although different types of cancer are more likely to spread to certain areas than others. The most common sites where cancer spreads are the bone, liver, and lung. The following list shows the most common sites of metastasis, not including the lymph nodes, for some common cancers.

<b>Bladder</b>	Bone, liver, lung
<b>Breast</b>	Bone, brain, liver, lung
<b>Colon</b>	Liver, lung, peritoneum (the lining inside the belly)
<b>Kidney</b>	Adrenal gland, bone, brain, liver, lung
<b>Lung</b>	Adrenal gland, bone, brain, liver, other lung
<b>Melanoma</b>	Bone, brain, liver, lung, skin, muscle
<b>Ovary</b>	Liver, lung, peritoneum
<b>Pancreas</b>	Liver, lung, peritoneum
<b>Prostate</b>	Adrenal gland, bone, liver, lung
<b>Rectal</b>	Liver, lung, peritoneum
<b>Stomach</b>	Liver, lung, peritoneum
<b>Thyroid</b>	Bone, liver, lung
<b>Uterus</b>	Bone, liver, lung, peritoneum, vagina

## **Treatments for Metastatic Cancer**

### **Can Metastatic Cancer Be Cured?**

Once cancer spreads, it can be hard to control. Although some types of metastatic cancer can be cured with current treatments, most cannot. Even so, there are treatments for all patients with metastatic cancer.

### **Goal of Treatment for Metastatic Cancer**

The goal of these treatments is to stop or slow the growth of the cancer or to relieve symptoms caused by it. In some cases, treatments for metastatic cancer may help prolong life. The treatment that you may have depends on your type of primary cancer, where it has spread, treatments you have had in the past, and your general health.

### **Palliative Care**

A treatment approach that may or may not include treatment directed at the cancer is known as palliative care. The goal of palliative care is to prevent or treat as early as possible the symptoms of a disease, side effects caused by treatment, and psychological, social, and spiritual problems. Palliative care is also called supportive care and symptom management.

### **When Metastatic Cancer Can No Longer Be Controlled**

If you have been told you have metastatic cancer that can no longer be controlled, you and your loved ones may want to discuss end-of-life care. If you have not done so, you may want to create an Advance Directive. Even if you choose to continue receiving treatment to try to shrink the cancer or control its growth, you can always receive palliative care to control the symptoms of cancer and the side effects of treatment.

## Clinical Trials

Researchers are studying new ways to kill or stop the growth of primary and metastatic cancer cells. This research includes finding ways to help your immune system fight cancer. Clinical trials are done to find out if new cancer treatments are safe and effective or better than the standard treatment.

People who take part in a clinical trial may receive:

- The standard drugs alone or
- The standard drugs plus the new treatment being studied

Many of today's standard treatments for cancer are based on earlier clinical trials.

**Ask if there is a clinical trial right for you.**

Taking part in a clinical trial helps improve the way cancer will be treated in the future. Even when clinical trials do not lead to effective new treatments, they often answer important questions and help move research forward.

## To Learn More

- **American Cancer Society**  
<https://www.cancer.org/>
- **National Cancer Institute**  
<https://www.cancer.gov/>
- **National Comprehensive Cancer Network  
Guidelines for Patients**  
<https://www.nccn.org/patients/guidelines/cancers.aspx>
- **MedlinePlus**  
<https://medlineplus.gov/>

## Common Questions

What are my goals for treatment?

What are my treatment choices?

What kind of support services are available for me about finances, emotions, spiritual questions, etc.?



My Health Care Team	Contact Information
Medical Oncologist:	
Radiation Oncologist:	
Nurse:	
Other:	

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The content of this booklet was adapted from content originally published by the National Cancer Institute. Metastatic Cancer. February 13, 2018. <https://www.cancer.gov/types/metastatic-cancer>

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