



Surgery: English

This information is about surgery (having an operation).

Many people with cancer will have surgery as part of their treatment.

It might not be the only treatment you need. Some people might have other cancer treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Doctors at the hospital will talk to you about your treatment.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on freephone **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

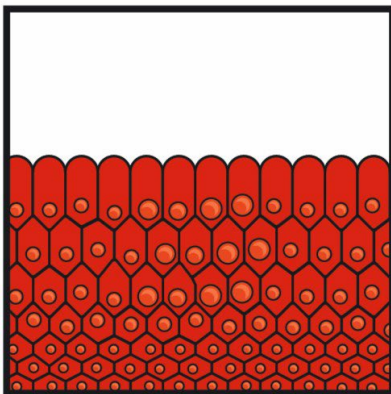
There is more cancer information in this language and other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations

This information is about:

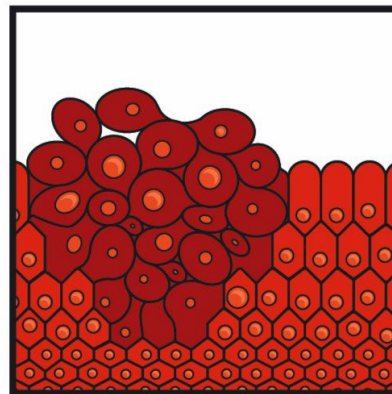
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What is cancer?

Cancer starts in our body's cells. Cells are the tiny building blocks that make up the organs and tissues of our body. Usually, these cells split to make new cells in a controlled way. This is how our bodies grow, heal and repair. Sometimes, this goes wrong, and the cell becomes abnormal. The abnormal cell keeps splitting and making more and more abnormal cells. These cells form a lump called a tumour.



Normal cells



Cells forming a tumour

Not all tumours are cancer. There are 2 main types of tumours:

- **benign** - these tumours are not cancer. They cannot spread to anywhere else in the body.
- **malignant** - these tumours are cancer. They can grow into other areas of the body.

The place where the cancer first begins to grow is the primary cancer. The primary cancer is named after the place in the body where it started, for example bowel cancer.

Sometimes, primary cancer cells spread to other parts of the body through the blood and the lymphatic system. This is called secondary cancer.

The lymphatic system helps protect us from infection and disease. It is made up of fine tubes called lymphatic vessels. These vessels connect to groups of small lymph nodes throughout the body.

Your surgeon

The doctor who does your operation is called a surgeon. It is important to see the right surgeon for your type of cancer. For example, someone with breast cancer will see a breast surgeon. The surgeon usually works at a hospital local to you. You can ask the surgeon about their experience if you want to.

If you have a less common cancer, you may need to see a surgeon at a specialist cancer hospital. This may be further away from where you live.

Why do you need surgery?

Surgery can be used to diagnose or treat cancer:

Diagnosis

The surgeon may remove a small piece of the cancer. This is called a biopsy. It helps doctors find out what type of cancer it is.

Staging

Staging is when doctors look at how big a cancer is and whether it has spread to any other parts of the body. Knowing the stage of the cancer can help doctors to plan your treatment.

Staging usually involves having some scans. There are different types of scans. Your doctor or nurse will explain which ones you might need and what to expect.

If your surgeon cannot see the tumour on a scan, you may need other tests. These tests could involve looking inside the body using a special tool with a light and a camera on the end. This can be done in 2 ways:

- the tool is passed through a small cut in the tummy (abdomen). This is known as keyhole surgery.
- the tool is passed through a natural opening to your body. For example, the tool is passed into your mouth, down your throat and into your tummy area (abdomen).

The nurse or doctor may give you medicine to help you relax. They may also spray the back of your throat with a special liquid to stop you feeling anything.

Treatment

Surgery is used to try to remove the tumour and some normal-looking tissue around it which might contain cancer cells. Surgery might also be used to remove cancer cells that have spread into another part of the body.

Sometimes other treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy, are given before surgery to make the tumour smaller. This may mean that less surgery is needed:

- **chemotherapy** – this is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells.
- **radiotherapy** – this is a cancer treatment that uses high-energy x-rays to kill cancer cells.

Before any treatment, a group of doctors and other health care professionals will meet to discuss your situation. This helps to make sure you are getting the best treatment. After the meeting, your surgeon or nurse will talk to you about your treatment options.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction means having surgery to make a new body part. This may help the body to work better, for example by making a new bladder if it has been removed. Reconstruction can also restore the appearance of a part of the body. For example, breast reconstruction can create a new breast shape after surgery to remove a breast (mastectomy).

Controlling symptoms

Sometimes cancer cannot be completely removed. In this case, surgery can often still help to control symptoms and make someone feel better.

Can the surgery cure the cancer?

The aim of surgery is often to try to cure the cancer. But this may not always be possible. This may be because the tumour is too difficult to remove, or because the cancer has spread too much into other parts of the body.

Sometimes the cancer is too small to find. Very small groups of cells cannot be seen by the surgeon and they don't always show up on scans.

If there is a risk that some cancer cells could be left behind, your doctor may suggest you have other cancer treatments after surgery, such as chemotherapy. This can help to reduce the risk of cancer coming back in the future.

For some cancers, surgery is not possible at all. In this case, you may have other cancer treatments.

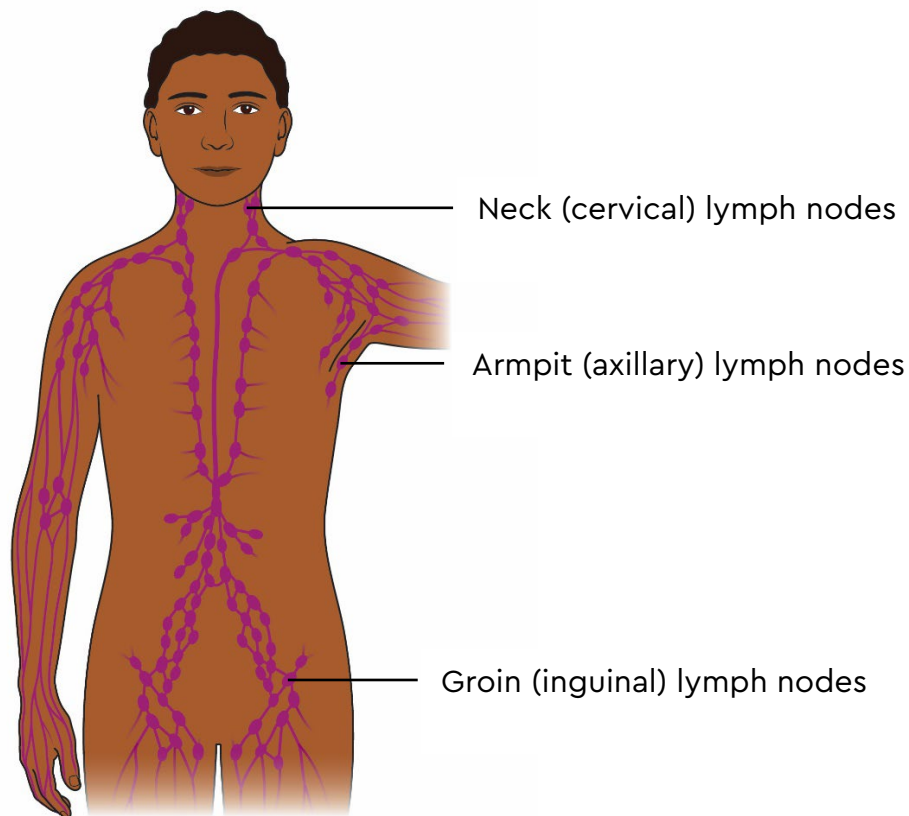
What happens during surgery?

The surgeon will remove the cancer and an area of normal-looking tissue around it. This will mean it is less likely that any cancer cells have been left behind. This helps to reduce the risk of the cancer coming back.

After your surgery, your doctor will look at the tissue under a microscope. They will make sure the area around the tumour does not contain any cancer cells.

Lymph nodes

Lymph nodes are part of the lymphatic system. This helps to protect us from infection and disease.



The lymphatic system

The surgeon may remove some lymph nodes close to the cancer. This is because cancer cells can spread to lymph nodes. If the lymph nodes contain cancer cells, this can increase the risk of the cancer coming back.

The removed lymph nodes are tested after surgery. If they contain cancer cells, you may be referred to a doctor called an oncologist. An oncologist is a cancer doctor who is an expert in cancer treatments such as radiotherapy, chemotherapy and other anti-cancer drugs. They will talk to you about other treatments that could reduce this risk.

Keyhole surgery (laparoscopic)

Keyhole surgery (laparoscopic) can be used to operate in the upper and lower tummy areas.

In this type of surgery, small openings are made in the body instead of 1 large cut. The surgeon uses an instrument to remove the tumour through a small cut in the skin. Sometimes a machine holds the tools. The surgeon operates the machine. This is called robotic surgery.

Keyhole surgery leaves a smaller wound, so people recover more quickly.

Open surgery

Open surgery is when the surgeon makes 1 large cut. This means the surgeon can see the cancer or parts of the body that need to be removed.

Sometimes they need to make more than 1 cut. For example, in breast surgery, they may make another cut in the armpit area (axilla) so they can remove lymph nodes too.

Before your operation

You will usually have a hospital appointment before the operation to have some tests. This is called a pre-operative assessment. The tests are to check you are well enough to have surgery. A nurse will ask about your medical history and if you have any allergies. It is important to tell them about any medicines you are taking, including any herbal remedies or supplements. They will also talk to you about your operation and how to get ready for it.

The nurse will weigh you and check your blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen level and temperature.

Other tests may include:

- blood and urine (pee) tests
- pregnancy test
- tests to check how well your lungs are working
- test to check how well your heart is working (electrocardiogram).

The tests you have will depend on what type of operation you are having, and whether you have any other health problems.

Giving consent

It is important that you understand everything about your operation. You should be able to talk to your surgeon before your operation. When you speak to the surgeon, it is a good idea to take someone with you who speaks both your language and English. Interpreters may be available at the hospital but try to ask for one in advance if you would like one.

You will need to sign a form to say that you agree to have the operation. This is called giving consent. Consent forms should be available in your language. You cannot have an operation without one.

It is normal to have some concerns about having surgery. Friends or family might also feel worried. Talking to your surgeon or nurse can help. They can answer any questions you have.

Having an anaesthetic

Some people are given a general anaesthetic for their operation. This means you are given drugs by a doctor called an anaesthetist that make you sleep during your surgery.

The anaesthetist cares for you while you are asleep and while you recover from the anaesthetic. They may also check you before surgery to make sure that you are safe to have an anaesthetic. Anaesthetists also give pain medication.

Other people might have an epidural, or spinal block. This is an injection into your back. This can be used for surgery in the lower half of the body. You are awake but you can't feel anything. You are usually also given some medicine to make you feel sleepy and relaxed.

Some people having a small operation may only need a local anaesthetic. This means that drugs are used to numb a small area of the body so you cannot feel anything.

On the day of your operation

What happens on the day of your operation depends on which type of surgery you are having. You will be told if you need to do anything to prepare for your surgery.

You might be asked to:

- not eat or drink anything before your surgery
- remove any jewellery or metal objects
- remove any nail varnish or makeup
- have a shower or bath on the morning of your operation.

The nurse may ask you to remove the body hair from the area before the operation. They will tell you what you need to do. Body hair is only shaved if it is needed. It is done using a disposable razor. The hair will grow back after the operation.

Having surgery can increase the risk of a blood clot. Wearing special compression stockings can help reduce this risk. The nurses on the ward at the hospital will measure your legs to get the right size and help you put the stockings on. You wear them during and after your surgery

Just before your operation, you will usually be asked to remove your glasses, contact lenses or dentures. The nurses will keep them safe, and you can wear them again once you wake up.

Before you go to the operating department (theatre), you will change into a gown. You can sometimes leave your underwear on.

You may be taken to the operating department on a trolley by a hospital porter. Someone from the hospital ward will go with you.

After your operation

You feel sleepy when you first wake up after surgery so it can help to know what to expect.

A nurse will check your blood pressure. You might feel the blood pressure monitor tighten on your arm. You may have an oxygen mask on your face while you wake up.

You may also have some tubes connected to your body. These could include:

- a drip of fluids into a vein until you can eat and drink normally – this may be a few hours or a few days
- a short, thin tube into a vein to give you medicines for pain and sickness – this is until you are able take tablets
- a tube where you had the operation to drain away fluid into a small bottle – this is usually removed after a few days
- a small tube passed into your bladder to drain urine (pee) into a bag. This is called a catheter.

Pain

It is normal to have some pain after surgery. This can usually be well controlled with pain medicine. If you have any pain, tell the nurse looking after you.

The pain will usually improve over time. If your medicines are not helping with your pain, tell your doctor. They can make changes to your medicine.

Feeling sick or being sick

If you feel sick after your operation, tell the nurse looking after you. They can give you medicines to help.

Moving around

You should be able to get out of bed soon after your operation. You may feel worried about this but the nurses will help you. Moving around will help you recover more quickly and reduce the risk of problems such as a blood clot or chest infection.

Sometimes after a big operation you may have to stay in bed for a longer time. Breathing exercises and leg exercises can help reduce the risk of problems after surgery. Your nurse or a physiotherapist will teach you these exercises. A physiotherapist is a professional who helps someone use movement or exercise to recover from illness or injury.

For a few days after your operation, you may need some help to wash and go to the toilet. Speak to your nurse if you would prefer help from a nurse of a different sex or gender.

Everyone recovers from an operation differently. You might feel tired for some time afterwards. Some people feel better quickly, while others can take much longer. This depends on the type of operation you have had.

Wound care

Your surgeon will close your wound with clips or stitches. These will be removed by a nurse at hospital or at home by a community or practice nurse.

Some surgeons use stitches that dissolve and don't need to be removed. These will disappear when the area heals. Your nurse will tell you which type of stitches you have.

You may have a pad or bandage to cover your wound. The nurse will tell you how to look after your wound. They will also talk to you about looking for signs of infection.

Signs of infection can include:

- heat, pain, swelling, redness or a darker change in skin colour. This can be over the wound, around the scar, or both
- fluid coming from the wound (discharge), which can smell
- a temperature above 37.5°C or above 99.5°F (a fever)
- feeling shivery and shaky
- feeling generally unwell, even with a normal temperature.

If you have any signs of infection, contact your doctor or nurse straightaway on the phone number you have been given.

They will look at the wound and may take a wound swab to send for testing. They may prescribe antibiotics.

Scars

Your scar may feel itchy at first. It may be red if you have white skin, or a darker colour if you have black or brown skin. In time, it will usually fade, although this might not always happen.

Long-term effects

Many people recover well from surgery, but some people have long-term problems. The doctors or nurses should talk to you about this before your operation, so you know what to expect. If you are worried about any of these problems, talk to your doctor or nurse. There are usually things that can help.

Fertility

Some operations can affect your fertility, such as having your womb removed. If you are worried about this, talk to your doctor or nurse before your treatment starts.

Lymphoedema

If your lymph nodes have been removed, you may get swelling called lymphoedema. The lymph nodes drain fluid out of the body. Removing them can cause fluid to build up. This can happen for example in an arm or leg near where the lymph nodes have been removed. Contact your doctor if you notice any swelling. It is important to treat it quickly.

Erectile dysfunction

In people assigned male at birth, surgery to remove the prostate gland may cause bladder problems, or difficulty getting an erection. This is called erectile dysfunction.

Physical and emotional changes

Recovering after an operation can take some time. Many people find this frustrating. It is important to rest when you feel tired. Try to increase your strength gradually. When you feel able to, doing gentle exercise such as a short walk can help give you more energy.

Some people can find it difficult to adjust to the different types of changes that surgery might bring.

Some operations change the way your body looks or the way your body works. These changes may cause you to feel upset. They could affect the way you feel about yourself.

There is a lot of support available, so please talk to your nurse or doctor if you feel this way. They should be able to help you or arrange for you to see a counsellor. A counsellor is a professional who is trained to help people cope with their emotions or personal problems. You could also call the Macmillan Support

Line free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to one of our nurses. You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

Getting the right care and support for you

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may have extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family you might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

How Macmillan can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

Macmillan Support Line

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

Our expert advisers on the Macmillan Support Line can help with medical questions or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. We can also talk to you about your money worries and recommend other useful organisations that can help. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan website

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations

We may also be able to arrange translations just for you. Email informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk to tell us what you need.

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Local support groups

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan Online Community

You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at macmillan.org.uk/community

You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read people's posts.

More information in your language

We have information in your language about these topics:

Signs and symptoms of cancer

- Signs and symptoms cards

If you are diagnosed with cancer

- Cancer care in the UK
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- If you are diagnosed with cancer

Types of cancer

- Bowel cancer
- Breast cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer

Treatment for cancer

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Sepsis and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Surgery

Living with cancer

- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- Healthy eating
- Help with costs when you have cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

End of life

- End of life

To see this information, go to macmillan.org.uk/translations

For more support to understand information, go to macmillan.org.uk/understandinginformation

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on our Surgery explained content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by members of Macmillan's Centre of Clinical Expertise.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk

Content reviewed: 2024

Next planned review: 2027

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