

Just Diagnosed: A Starting-Point Guide

A calm, ordered starting point for the first weeks after a cancer diagnosis — reading your pathology report, getting a second opinion, and building your care team.

8 chapters · assembled from our reviewed articles · last assembled 2026-09-13

Educational information, not medical advice. Not a substitute for your own care team.

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The first weeks after a cancer diagnosis are often the hardest to think clearly in — there's a lot of new vocabulary, a lot of decisions, and not much time to absorb any of it. This guide puts the most useful next steps in one order: understanding what your report actually says, deciding whether to get a second opinion, organizing your records, and knowing who's who on a cancer care team. It won't tell you what your specific diagnosis means for you — only your care team can do that — but it will make the conversations with them easier to have.

CHAPTER 1

How to Read a Cancer Pathology Report

4 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-10

A pathology report is mostly descriptive groundwork. The diagnosis line and the synoptic summary carry the conclusion; the rest is the evidence behind it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The diagnosis line is the conclusion; the gross and microscopic sections are the evidence that led to it.
- The gross description records size, color and handling of the tissue, not how dangerous the cancer is.
- Grade describes how abnormal cells look; stage describes size and spread. They are separate measurements.
- Margins apply only to surgical specimens, so a needle biopsy report has no meaningful margin status.
- Immunohistochemistry and molecular results usually arrive later as an addendum, which is routine sequencing of lab work.
- The synoptic summary is a standardized checklist and the fastest place to find one specific number.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/report-terms/how-to-read-a-cancer-pathology-report

CHAPTER 2

Getting a Second Opinion After a Diagnosis

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-11

A second opinion means asking another cancer doctor to review your test results and treatment plan. It is common, and most doctors expect it. In most cases there is time to get one before starting treatment. Bring copies of your pathology report, scans, and treatment plan, and check what your insurance covers first.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A second opinion is when another cancer doctor reviews your diagnosis and treatment plan. It is common, and it is your right.
- For most cancers, taking some time to get a second opinion is safe — but ask your doctor whether your situation is one of the few that needs treatment right away.
- Good reasons include a rare cancer, uncertainty about the type or stage, several treatment options, or simply wanting peace of mind.
- Ask your current doctor's office for copies of your pathology report, operative report, scans, and treatment plan to share with the second doctor.
- Contact your insurance company first — some plans require a second opinion, and others have rules about which doctors are covered.
- If the two opinions differ, ask both doctors to explain their reasoning, and consider asking them to review your case together.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/getting-a-second-opinion

CHAPTER 3

How to Organize Cancer Records for a Second Opinion

4 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-10

A second opinion needs glass slides, imaging on disc, the pathology report and a treatment summary. Federal law gives you access within 30 days; slides move separately and take longest.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The pathology report alone is not enough. A second-opinion pathologist needs the actual glass slides, and sometimes the paraffin block, to re-read the diagnosis.
- Radiologists need the images themselves in DICOM format on a disc or shared link, not the written report. Request them from the radiology file room, not the front desk.
- Under the HIPAA right of access, providers generally must give you your records within 30 days, in electronic form if held that way, cannot charge per page for electronic copies, and cannot withhold records because you owe money.
- The 21st Century Cures Act information blocking rule means test results, pathology reports and imaging reports are released to your portal without delay. Download them yourself rather than waiting for a call.
- Slides and blocks are the slow step. Start those requests seven to ten days before everything else.
- Build a one-page summary sheet — diagnosis, stage, biomarkers, treatments with dates and doses. It saves fifteen minutes of every consultation.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/how-to-organize-cancer-records-for-a-second-opinion

CHAPTER 4

How to Get Pathology Slides for a Second Opinion

6 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-06

How to Get Pathology Slides for a Second Opinion helps with requesting the actual slides, blocks, reports, and related materials for outside pathology review. The first step is to ask the pathology department or medical records office how outside slide review requests are handled. This guide gives scripts, checklists, questions, and practical details to make the next conversation easier.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This guide focuses on requesting the actual slides, blocks, reports, and related materials for outside pathology review.
- A good first step is to ask the pathology department or medical records office how outside slide review requests are handled.
- A written checklist reduces the chance that important details get lost.
- Ask your care team, navigator, social worker, or records office for local rules and support.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/practical-support/how-to-get-your-pathology-slides-for-a-second-opinion

CHAPTER 5

What Should I Bring to My First Oncology Appointment?

5 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-05

Your first oncology appointment covers a lot, and being prepared helps you absorb it. Bring your records (pathology report, imaging, medication list), a written list of questions, insurance and ID, and — ideally — a trusted person to listen and take notes. Ask if you can record the conversation. Knowing who your main contact is and what happens next are two of the most useful things to leave with.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bring records: pathology report, imaging or a disc/portal access, and a full medication list.
- Bring a written question list and a person to help you listen and take notes.
- Bring insurance card, ID, and a list of your other doctors.
- Leave knowing your main contact and the next step.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/what-to-expect/what-to-bring-to-your-first-oncology-appointment

CHAPTER 6

Who Does What on a Cancer Care Team?

3 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-10

Beyond your oncologists, a cancer team includes pathologists, radiologists, nurse navigators, advanced practice providers, social workers, pharmacists and palliative care. Knowing who does what unlocks help you already have.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most of the practical help in cancer care comes from people who are not your oncologist: nurse navigators, social workers, financial counselors, pharmacists and dietitians.
- The pathologist and radiologist never meet you but make decisions that shape everything. You can request their reports in full and ask for a second read.
- An oncology nurse navigator is your fastest route to scheduling, coordination and "who do I call about this." Ask whether your program has one. Since 2024 Medicare pays for navigation services, so more programs do.
- Oncology social workers handle transport, housing, benefits, work leave, family strain and counseling referrals. They are free at most cancer programs and badly underused.
- Palliative care is symptom and quality-of-life care available from diagnosis onward, alongside treatment aimed at cure. It is not hospice.
- Ask for one named point of contact and one after-hours phone number, and write both down.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/who-does-what-on-a-cancer-care-team

CHAPTER 7

Questions to Ask Your Oncologist

6 min read · last reviewed 2026-07-04

When you meet with your oncologist you will hear a lot of information, and it is hard to remember everything. Writing questions down ahead of time — about your diagnosis, treatment options, side effects, and daily life — helps you get the answers you need. Bring the list, take notes, and consider bringing someone with you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Think ahead about what you want to know and bring a written list of questions to every appointment.
- Key diagnosis questions: What type of cancer do I have? What stage? Has it spread? Will I need more tests?
- Key treatment questions: What are my options? What are the benefits and risks of each? What do you recommend, and why?
- Ask which side effects to expect, which ones to call about right away, and how side effects can be prevented or treated.
- Ask practical questions too — about work, daily activities, fertility, and whether a clinical trial might be right for you.
- Take notes, bring a family member or friend, and ask your doctor to explain anything you don't understand.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/questions-to-ask-your-oncologist

CHAPTER 8

Medical vs. Surgical vs. Radiation Oncologist Roles

3 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-10

Medical oncologists give drug treatments, surgical oncologists operate, radiation oncologists deliver radiation. Most people see all three. Knowing who owns which problem saves days of misdirected calls.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Medical oncologists prescribe drug treatments, surgical oncologists operate, radiation oncologists deliver radiation. Seeing all three is normal and does not mean your cancer is worse.
- The medical oncologist is usually the long-term coordinator, but the surgeon leads around the operation and the radiation oncologist leads during a radiation course. Ask who is leading now.
- Call the surgeon's office for wounds, drains, and questions about the surgical pathology; the radiation oncologist for skin reactions and problems during a radiation course; the medical oncologist for drug side effects, fevers and everything else.
- Some specialists combine roles. A gynecologic oncologist both operates and gives chemotherapy; a hematologist-oncologist treats blood cancers and often solid tumors too.
- Ask each specialist what they think of the others' plan. Understanding how the three parts fit together is more useful than understanding each in isolation.
- Get one phone number for after-hours problems and put it in your phone. Most oncology practices run a 24-hour triage line.

Read the full article: cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/medical-oncologist-versus-surgical-oncologist-versus-radiation-oncologist

SOURCES & WHERE TO READ MORE

Everything in this guide is educational, not medical advice, and none of it replaces your own care team. If one part raised a question, that's worth bringing to your next appointment — the goal here is better questions, not a replacement for the answers only your doctors have.

FULL SOURCE LIST

1. How to Read a Cancer Pathology Report — cancerexplained.org/report-terms/how-to-read-a-cancer-pathology-report (last reviewed 2026-08-10)
2. Getting a Second Opinion After a Diagnosis — cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/getting-a-second-opinion (last reviewed 2026-08-11)
3. How to Organize Cancer Records for a Second Opinion — cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/how-to-organize-cancer-records-for-a-second-opinion (last reviewed 2026-08-10)
4. How to Get Pathology Slides for a Second Opinion — cancerexplained.org/practical-support/how-to-get-your-pathology-slides-for-a-second-opinion (last reviewed 2026-08-06)
5. What Should I Bring to My First Oncology Appointment? — cancerexplained.org/what-to-expect/what-to-bring-to-your-first-oncology-appointment (last reviewed 2026-08-05)
6. Who Does What on a Cancer Care Team? — cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/who-does-what-on-a-cancer-care-team (last reviewed 2026-08-10)
7. Questions to Ask Your Oncologist — cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/questions-to-ask-your-oncologist (last reviewed 2026-07-04)
8. Medical vs. Surgical vs. Radiation Oncologist Roles — cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/medical-oncologist-versus-surgical-oncologist-versus-radiation-oncologist (last reviewed 2026-08-10)

This guide is educational information assembled from cancerexplained.org's reviewed articles. It is not medical advice and does not replace care from a qualified health professional. Bring any questions it raises to your own care team. Each article listed above carries its own review date; visit the linked page on cancerexplained.org for the current version and any updates made since this guide was assembled.