

# Understanding Cancer Treatment: A Starting Guide

How the major cancer treatments work — chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, immunotherapy, and targeted therapy — and how to think through a treatment plan and clinical trials.

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9 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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Cancer treatment plans can combine several different approaches, each working in a different way and carrying its own set of side effects and logistics. This guide walks through the main treatment types in plain language — what chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, immunotherapy, and targeted therapy actually do — plus how a treatment plan gets put together, what to ask before it starts, and how clinical trials fit in as an option. It's meant to make the vocabulary familiar before you hear it in an appointment, not to tell you which treatment is right for you.

## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding Your Treatment Plan

4 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-05

A treatment plan describes the treatments recommended for your cancer, in what order, and their goals. It is built around your cancer's type and stage, your health, and your wishes — and you are part of the decisions.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A treatment plan lays out which treatments are recommended, in what order, and why.
- It is based on your cancer's type and stage, your health, and your preferences.
- The goal may be to cure, to control, or to relieve symptoms — it helps to know which.
- You have a right to understand the plan and to ask about other options.
- A second opinion is common and can confirm or add to the plan.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/understanding-your-treatment-plan](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/understanding-your-treatment-plan)

## CHAPTER 2

# Questions to Ask Before Cancer Treatment Begins

9 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-13

Preparing for cancer treatment can feel overwhelming. Having a structured list of clear questions to ask your oncologist, surgeon, and care team restores control and confidence.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Before starting treatment, clarify your primary goal (curative, control, or symptom relief) and expected timeline.
- Ask about expected short-term and long-term side effects, as well as preventive medications (like anti-nausea drugs).
- Inquire about practical logistics: appointment frequency, driving restrictions, work accommodations, and emergency phone numbers.
- Verify treatment costs, prior authorization status, and available financial navigation services before your first session.
- Bring a trusted caregiver or family member to take notes and audio-record conversations (with your doctor's permission).

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/questions-to-ask-before-cancer-treatment-begins](https://cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/questions-to-ask-before-cancer-treatment-begins)

## CHAPTER 3

# What Is Chemotherapy? How It Works

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-18

Chemotherapy (also called chemo) is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells. It works by killing or stopping the growth of fast-growing cells. Because it also affects some healthy fast-growing cells, it can cause side effects such as fatigue, but these often get better after treatment ends.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells or stop their growth.
- It can cure cancer, lower the chance it returns, slow its growth, or ease symptoms.
- It is often used together with other treatments like surgery and radiation therapy.
- Side effects happen because chemo also affects healthy fast-growing cells; fatigue is the most common.
- Chemo is often given in cycles, with treatment followed by a rest period.
- Side effects do not tell you whether the treatment is working.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/chemotherapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/chemotherapy)

## CHAPTER 4

# What Is Radiation Therapy?

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-18

Radiation therapy is a cancer treatment that uses high doses of radiation to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. It works by damaging the DNA inside cancer cells so they stop dividing or die. There are two main types: external beam radiation, which comes from a machine, and internal radiation, which is placed inside the body.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Radiation therapy uses high doses of radiation to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors.
- It works by damaging the DNA inside cancer cells so they stop dividing or die.
- The two main types are external beam radiation and internal radiation.
- It does not kill cancer cells right away; cells keep dying for weeks or months after treatment ends.
- It is often used with other treatments and can be given before, during, or after them.
- There is a limit to how much radiation an area of the body can safely receive over a lifetime.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/radiation-therapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/radiation-therapy)

## CHAPTER 5

# What Is Surgery for Cancer?

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-13

Surgery, when used to treat cancer, is a procedure in which a surgeon removes cancer from your body. It works best for solid tumors that are contained in one area. Surgery may be open, with one large cut, or minimally invasive, with a few small cuts. Anesthesia keeps you from feeling pain during the procedure.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Surgery is a procedure in which a surgeon removes cancer from your body.
- It works best for solid tumors contained in one area and is a local treatment.
- Surgery may be open (one large cut) or minimally invasive (a few small cuts).
- Anesthesia keeps you from feeling pain during surgery.
- Surgery can remove a whole tumor, remove part of a tumor (debulk it), or ease symptoms.
- Common risks include pain and infection; your team can help you manage them.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/surgery-for-cancer](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/surgery-for-cancer)

## CHAPTER 6

# What Is Immunotherapy? Cancer and the Immune System

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-11

Immunotherapy is a type of cancer treatment that helps your immune system fight cancer. The immune system normally detects and destroys abnormal cells, but cancer cells have ways to avoid it. Immunotherapy helps the immune system act more strongly against cancer. There are several types, including checkpoint inhibitors and monoclonal antibodies.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Immunotherapy helps your immune system fight cancer.
- It is a type of biological therapy, which uses substances made from living organisms.
- Cancer cells have ways to avoid the immune system; immunotherapy helps the immune system act against them.
- Types include checkpoint inhibitors, T-cell transfer therapy, monoclonal antibodies, treatment vaccines, and immune system modulators.
- Side effects can happen when the revved-up immune system also acts against healthy cells.
- It may be given by IV, by mouth, on the skin, or into the bladder.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/immunotherapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/immunotherapy)

## CHAPTER 7

# What Is Targeted Therapy?

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-13

Targeted therapy is a type of cancer treatment that targets proteins that control how cancer cells grow, divide, and spread. It is the foundation of precision medicine. Most targeted therapies are either small-molecule drugs or monoclonal antibodies. Often your tumor is tested first to see if it has a target for a drug.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Targeted therapy targets proteins that control how cancer cells grow, divide, and spread.
- It is the foundation of precision medicine.
- Most targeted therapies are small-molecule drugs or monoclonal antibodies.
- Often your tumor is tested (biomarker testing) to see if it has a target for a drug.
- It works differently from chemotherapy, which often kills all fast-dividing cells.
- Cancer cells can become resistant, so it is often combined with other treatments.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/treatments/targeted-therapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/targeted-therapy)

## CHAPTER 8

# Side Effects of Cancer Treatment

5 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-13

Cancer and cancer treatments can cause side effects—problems that happen when treatment affects healthy tissues or organs. Side effects vary from person to person, even among people getting the same treatment. Your health care team can treat many side effects or help you reduce them, so it helps to speak up about any problems you have.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Side effects are problems that occur when treatment affects healthy tissues or organs.
- Both the cancer itself and cancer treatments can cause side effects.
- Side effects vary from person to person, even among people getting the same treatment.
- Your health care team can treat many side effects or find ways to reduce them.
- Telling your doctor about side effects helps you get the care you need to feel better.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/side-effects/side-effects-overview](https://cancerexplained.org/side-effects/side-effects-overview)

## CHAPTER 9

# How to Find a Clinical Trial

7 min read · last reviewed 2026-08-05

Finding a clinical trial takes four steps: gather the details of your cancer (type, stage, prior treatments), search a trial database like NCI's find-a-trial tool or ClinicalTrials.gov, review each trial's eligibility criteria, and contact the trial team. NCI's helpline at 1-800-4-CANCER can search with you for free, and your oncologist should be part of the decision.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Ask your oncologist first: 'Would a clinical trial be right for me?' — doctors often know of trials, and trials are an option at many points in care, not a last resort.
- Before searching, gather your details: exact cancer type, stage, biomarker or genetic test results, prior treatments, age, and general health.
- NCI's clinical trials search at cancer.gov covers NCI-supported cancer trials; ClinicalTrials.gov lists studies across diseases run worldwide.
- NCI's Cancer Information Service (1-800-4-CANCER, 1-800-422-6237) will search for trials with you by phone, free.
- Every trial has eligibility criteria — rules about who can join. Not qualifying for one trial says nothing about your prognosis.
- In a trial, study-related research costs are typically covered by the study, and routine care costs typically bill to insurance — confirm both before joining.

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Read the full article: [cancerexplained.org/clinical-trials/finding-a-clinical-trial](https://cancerexplained.org/clinical-trials/finding-a-clinical-trial)

## SOURCES & WHERE TO READ MORE

Only your oncology team can weigh your specific diagnosis, health, and preferences against these options — this guide is meant to make that conversation easier, not replace it. If a treatment you were offered isn't described the way you expected, that mismatch is worth asking about directly.

### FULL SOURCE LIST

1. Understanding Your Treatment Plan — [cancerexplained.org/treatments/understanding-your-treatment-plan](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/understanding-your-treatment-plan) (last reviewed 2026-08-05)
2. Questions to Ask Before Cancer Treatment Begins — [cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/questions-to-ask-before-cancer-treatment-begins](https://cancerexplained.org/questions-to-ask/questions-to-ask-before-cancer-treatment-begins) (last reviewed 2026-08-13)
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5. What Is Surgery for Cancer? — [cancerexplained.org/treatments/surgery-for-cancer](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/surgery-for-cancer) (last reviewed 2026-08-13)
6. What Is Immunotherapy? Cancer and the Immune System — [cancerexplained.org/treatments/immunotherapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/immunotherapy) (last reviewed 2026-08-11)
7. What Is Targeted Therapy? — [cancerexplained.org/treatments/targeted-therapy](https://cancerexplained.org/treatments/targeted-therapy) (last reviewed 2026-08-13)
8. Side Effects of Cancer Treatment — [cancerexplained.org/side-effects/side-effects-overview](https://cancerexplained.org/side-effects/side-effects-overview) (last reviewed 2026-08-13)
9. How to Find a Clinical Trial — [cancerexplained.org/clinical-trials/finding-a-clinical-trial](https://cancerexplained.org/clinical-trials/finding-a-clinical-trial) (last reviewed 2026-08-05)

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