

Cancer Staging: What the Stage Means

The stage of a cancer describes its extent—how large the tumor is and whether it has spread. Knowing the stage helps doctors understand how serious the cancer is and plan treatment. The most widely used system is the TNM system, which describes the tumor, nearby lymph nodes, and spread.

The simple version

Stage refers to the extent of your cancer, such as how large the tumor is and if it has spread. Knowing the stage of your cancer helps your doctor:

- understand how serious your cancer is and your chances of survival
- plan the best treatment for you
- identify clinical trials that may be treatment options for you

The stage is a shorthand for how far the cancer has gone — and it guides many treatment decisions.

Your stage stays the same, even if the cancer changes

A cancer is always referred to by the stage it was given at diagnosis, even if it later gets worse or spreads. New information about how a cancer has changed over time is added to the original stage. So the stage doesn't change, even though the cancer might.

How the stage is determined

To learn the stage of your disease, your doctor may order X-rays, lab tests, and other tests or procedures. These are often the same kinds of tests used to diagnose cancer in the first place.

Most staging systems include information about:

- where the tumor is located in the body
- the size of the tumor
- whether the cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes
- whether the cancer has spread to a different part of the body

The TNM system: tumor, nodes, and spread

There are many staging systems. Some, such as the TNM staging system, are used for many types of cancer. Others are specific to a particular type of cancer.

The TNM system is the most widely used cancer staging system. Most hospitals and medical centers use it as their main method for cancer reporting. You are likely to see your cancer described this way in your pathology report. The exception is when there is a different staging system for your type of cancer. Examples of cancers with different staging systems include brain and spinal cord tumors and blood cancers.

In the TNM system:

- **T** refers to the size and extent of the main tumor, usually called the primary tumor.
- **N** refers to the number of nearby lymph nodes that have cancer.
- **M** refers to whether the cancer has metastasized—spread from the primary tumor to other parts of the body.

Numbers after each letter give more detail, such as T1N0MX or T3N1M0.

Primary tumor (T):

- TX: Main tumor cannot be measured.
- T0: Main tumor cannot be found.
- T1, T2, T3, T4: The size and/or extent of the main tumor. The higher the number, the larger the tumor or the more it has grown into nearby tissues. T's may be further divided, such as T3a and T3b.

Regional lymph nodes (N):

- NX: Cancer in nearby lymph nodes cannot be measured.
- N0: There is no cancer in nearby lymph nodes.
- N1, N2, N3: The number and location of lymph nodes with cancer. The higher the number, the more lymph nodes contain cancer.

Distant metastasis (M):

- MX: Metastasis cannot be measured.
- M0: Cancer has not spread to other parts of the body.
- M1: Cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

Stage numbers 0 to 4

The TNM letters can be summed up in a simpler way. For many cancers, the TNM combinations are grouped into five less-detailed stages:

- **Stage 0** — Abnormal cells are present but have not spread to nearby tissue. Also called carcinoma in situ (CIS). CIS is not cancer, but it may become cancer.
- **Stage I, Stage II, and Stage III** (also written as Stage 1, 2, and 3) — Cancer is present. The higher the number, the larger the tumor and the more it has spread into nearby tissues.
- **Stage IV** (also written as Stage 4) — The cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.

The higher the number, the more advanced the cancer is. Letters and numbers are often added after the first number to describe the cancer in more detail. For instance, Stage 2 prostate cancer may be further divided into 2A, 2B, or 2C.

Another way to describe the stage

Another staging system groups cancer into one of five main categories. It is used more often by cancer registries than by doctors. You may still hear a doctor or nurse use these terms:

- **In situ** — Abnormal cells are present but have not spread to nearby tissue.
- **Localized** — Cancer is limited to the place where it started, with no sign of spread.
- **Regional** — Cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes, tissues, or organs.
- **Distant** — Cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.
- **Unknown** — There is not enough information to figure out the stage.

Whether described by TNM, a stage number, or these categories, the goal is the same: to capture how far the cancer has spread so the team can plan care.

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging)

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