

Symptoms of Cancer: What to Watch For

Cancer can cause many symptoms, but these symptoms are most often caused by other problems, such as illness, injury, or benign tumors. If you have symptoms that do not get better after a couple of weeks, see a doctor so problems can be found and treated early. Cancer often does not cause pain.

The simple version

Cancer can cause many symptoms. But these symptoms are most often caused by something else — illness, injury, a benign tumor, or another problem.

See your doctor if a symptom does not get better after a couple of weeks. Early care means problems get diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

Most symptoms are not cancer. But a symptom that sticks around for a couple of weeks is worth checking with a doctor.

When to get help sooner

The usual advice — see someone after a couple of weeks — is for symptoms that stay stable and mild.

- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department now if** you have sudden face drooping, one-sided weakness, slurred speech, confusion, or sudden vision or balance loss. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department now if** breathing is severely difficult, or chest pressure spreads to your arm, back, neck, or jaw. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department now if** bleeding will not stop, you cough up more than a few teaspoons of blood, or the toilet water turns red.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department now if** a seizure lasts more than 5 minutes or is your first-ever seizure.
- **Call your care team now, whatever the time, if** you are on chemotherapy and your temperature reaches 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, even once. The CDC says a fever during chemotherapy is a medical emergency and to call your doctor immediately ([CDC \(cdc.gov/cancer-p-reventing-infections/patients/fever.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-p-reventing-infections/patients/fever.html)). If you cannot reach them right away, go to an emergency department and tell them you are on chemotherapy.
- **Call your care team right away if** you have new back pain with leg weakness. For emergencies call 911 or go to the ER.

- **Call your care team the same day if** you see blood where it does not belong, or yellowing skin or eyes.

Everything else can follow the ordinary route: see your doctor within a couple of weeks.

Don't wait for pain

Cancer often does not cause pain. It can be tempting to wait until something hurts before seeing a doctor. Do not wait for pain. If a symptom lasts a couple of weeks, see a doctor rather than waiting for pain.

Seeing a doctor early gives any problem — cancer or something else — the best chance of being found and treated early.

Symptoms cancer may cause

The symptoms below are ones cancer may cause. Remember: these are most often caused by conditions other than cancer.

Breast changes:

- A lump or firm feeling in your breast or under your arm.
- Nipple changes or discharge.
- Skin that is itchy, red, scaly, dimpled, or puckered.

Bladder changes:

- Trouble urinating.
- Pain when urinating.
- Blood in the urine.

Bleeding or bruising for no known reason.

Bowel changes:

- Blood in the stools.
- Changes in bowel habits.

Cough or hoarseness that does not go away.

Eating problems:

- Pain after eating, such as heartburn or indigestion that doesn't go away.
- Trouble swallowing.
- Belly pain.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Appetite changes.

Fatigue that is severe and lasts.

Fever or night sweats for no known reason.

Mouth changes:

- A white or red patch on the tongue or in your mouth.
- Bleeding, pain, or numbness in the lip or mouth.

Neurological problems:

- Headaches.
- Seizures.
- Vision changes.
- Hearing changes.
- Drooping of the face.

Skin changes:

- A flesh-colored lump that bleeds or turns scaly.
- A new mole, or a change in an existing mole.
- A sore that does not heal.
- Jaundice, which is yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes.

Swelling or lumps anywhere, such as in the neck, underarm, stomach, or groin.

Weight gain or weight loss for no known reason.

Specific symptom questions

Some people come to this page with one exact question rather than a whole symptom list. These guides go deeper on patterns like shortness of breath, breast pain, nipple discharge, bloating, jaundice, and loss of appetite.

Newer guides cover more specific searches, including persistent cough, coughing up blood, trouble swallowing, postmenopausal bleeding, bleeding after sex, breast lump, testicular lump, changing mole, night sweats, bone pain, neck lump, a sore that won't heal, seizures, vision changes, unexplained bruising, frequent urination, feeling full quickly, and white patches in the mouth.

Learning about a specific cancer

The list above covers general symptoms. Each type of cancer can have its own symptoms. The National Cancer Institute provides PDQ cancer treatment summaries for adult and childhood cancers. Each summary includes detailed information about symptoms caused by that specific type of cancer.

The best next step for any symptom that lasts is to see a doctor. Early answers help, whatever the cause turns out to be.

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

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Online: cancerexplained.org/symptoms/cancer-symptoms

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