

Types of Cancer Treatment: An Overview

There are many types of cancer treatment. Some people have only one treatment, but most people have a combination, such as surgery with chemotherapy and radiation therapy. The treatments you receive depend on the type of cancer you have and how advanced it is.

The simple version

There are many types of cancer treatment. Some people with cancer have only one treatment. But most people have a combination of treatments. A common example is surgery with chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

The types of treatment you receive depend on two things. They depend on the type of cancer you have. They also depend on how advanced it is.

Most people with cancer receive more than one kind of treatment.

The main types of treatment

The National Cancer Institute lists several main types of cancer treatment:

- **Chemotherapy** kills cancer and other fast-growing cells, or stops them growing.
- **Hormone therapy** slows or stops the growth of breast and prostate cancers that use hormones to grow.
- **Hyperthermia** heats body tissue to help damage and kill cancer cells.
- **Immunotherapy** helps your immune system fight cancer.
- **Photodynamic therapy** uses a drug activated by light to kill cancer and other abnormal cells.
- **Radiation therapy** uses high doses of radiation to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors.
- **Stem cell (blood stem cell) transplants** restore blood-forming stem cells. They are used in people who have had theirs destroyed by high doses of chemotherapy or radiation therapy.
- **Surgery** is a procedure in which a surgeon removes cancer from your body.
- **Targeted therapy** targets the changes in cancer cells that help them grow, divide, and spread.

How your treatment is chosen

Every cancer is different. So two people with cancer may have very different treatment plans.

Biomarker testing is one tool that can help. It may help you and your doctor choose a cancer treatment for you.

Your plan is built around your specific cancer, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Compare options

Some searches happen when a person is trying to compare two paths. These guides explain the decision points:

- immunotherapy vs chemotherapy.
- targeted therapy vs chemotherapy.
- radiation vs chemotherapy.
- lumpectomy vs mastectomy.
- active surveillance vs treatment.
- clinical trial vs standard treatment.
- maintenance therapy vs active treatment.
- radiation vs surgery for prostate cancer.
- chemo before vs after surgery.
- proton therapy vs standard radiation.
- SBRT vs surgery.
- transplant vs CAR T-cell therapy.

Before choosing, it can help to bring a focused list of questions. Each treatment page carries its own: chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or biomarker testing.

Treatment by stage and regimen names

Once staging and biomarker results are in, many people want a cancer-specific view. Start with the treatment-by-stage guides:

- breast cancer.
- lung cancer.
- colon cancer.
- prostate cancer.
- pancreatic cancer.
- ovarian cancer.
- melanoma.
- bladder cancer.
- kidney cancer.
- endometrial cancer.

This cluster now also covers more cancers:

- cervical cancer.
- liver cancer.
- stomach cancer.
- esophageal cancer.
- thyroid cancer.
- testicular cancer.
- brain tumors.
- lymphoma.
- leukemia.
- multiple myeloma.
- sarcoma.
- head and neck cancer.

Your portal or consent form may list a treatment name. These explainers translate common regimen and drug-class language: FOLFOX, FOLFIRINOX, R-CHOP, ABVD, AC-T, Carboplatin-Taxol, PARP inhibitors, and CDK4/6 inhibitors.

Learning more about your cancer

Do you want to know how a specific cancer is treated? The National Cancer Institute provides cancer treatment information for both adult and childhood cancers.

If you are getting ready for an appointment, it can help to bring questions with you. NCI offers a list of questions to ask your doctor about treatment. It can help you talk with your doctor and learn more about your treatment options.

Bringing questions to your appointment can help you understand your options.

Regimen explainers

More regimen pages explain what to ask: FLOT, CAPOX/XELOX, FOLFOX vs FOLFIRI, TC, carboplatin-Taxol for ovarian cancer, R-CHOP day by day, and maintenance therapy for myeloma.

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types)

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