CANCER EXPLAINED PRESENTS



A PLAIN-LANGUAGE GUIDE

PATHOLOGY REPORT TERMS

Plain-language meanings for words on a pathology report

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Pathology Report Terms

Plain-language meanings for words on a pathology report

1 The basics

- ☐ Pathology report — the written result after a pathologist examines a tissue or fluid sample.
- ☐ Specimen — the sample of tissue or fluid that was examined.
- ☐ Gross description — what the sample looked like to the naked eye (size, color, weight).
- ☐ Microscopic description — what the cells looked like under the microscope.

2 Words you may see

- ☐ Benign — not cancer. Malignant — cancer.
- ☐ Grade — how abnormal the cells look and how quickly they may grow; often written as a number (e.g. grade 1–3).
- ☐ Margins — the edges of removed tissue; "negative" or "clear" margins means no cancer cells were seen at the edge.
- ☐ In situ — abnormal cells that have stayed where they started. Invasive — cells that have grown into nearby tissue.
- ☐ Lymph node involvement — whether cancer cells were found in nearby lymph nodes.
- ☐ Biomarkers / receptors — features of the cells (like proteins or gene changes) that can help guide treatment choices.

3 Good questions for your healthcare team

- ? Can you walk me through my report in plain language?
- ? Which parts of this report matter most for my next steps?
- ? Can I get a copy of the report for my records?

THE BOTTOM LINE

A pathology report is written for doctors — you're not expected to decode it alone. Ask your healthcare team to explain yours.

Sources: NCI: Pathology reports fact sheet (cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/diagnosis/pathology-reports-fact-sheet)

Learn more in plain language: cancerexplained.org/diagnosis/pathology-reports · **Updated:** 2026-07-05

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