



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

If You Have Small Cell Lung Cancer

If you or someone you know has just been diagnosed with **small cell lung cancer**, this short guide can help. Find information on small cell lung cancer here.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- What will happen next?
- What other doctors should I see?

How will the doctor know if I have lung cancer?

Symptoms of lung cancer are cough, chest pain, and trouble breathing. The doctor will ask you questions about your health and do a physical exam.

If signs point to lung cancer, more tests will be done. Here are some of the [tests you may need](#)²:

Chest x-ray: This is often the first test used to look for spots on your lungs. If a change is seen, you will need more tests.

CT scan: This is also called a CAT scan. A CT scan is a special kind of x-ray that takes detailed pictures of your insides. CT scans can also be used to do a biopsy (see below).

PET scan: A type of sugar is put in one of your veins for this test. Then, pictures of your insides are taken with a special camera. If there is cancer, the sugar shows up as “hot spots” where the cancer is found. This test is helpful when your doctor thinks the cancer has spread, but they don’t know where.

Biopsy: For a biopsy, the doctor takes out a small piece of the lung tumor. It’s sent to the lab to see if there are cancer cells in it. This is the best way to know for sure if you have cancer.

Bronchoscopy: A thin, lighted, flexible tube is passed through your mouth into the bronchi. The doctor can look through the tube to find tumors. The tube also can be used to take out a piece of the tumor or fluid to see if there are cancer cells.

Blood tests: Blood tests are not used to find lung cancer, but they are done to tell the doctor more about your health.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?

- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- Who can explain them to me?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

How serious is my cancer?

If you have small cell lung cancer, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called [staging](#)³. Knowing the cancer's stage helps your doctor decide what treatment is best for you.

For small cell lung cancer, a 2-stage system is often used. Small cell lung cancers are staged as **limited** stage and **extensive** stage.

- **Limited stage** means that the cancer is only in one lung and may be in lymph nodes on the same side of the chest.
- **Extensive stage** means that the cancer has spread to the other lung, to lymph nodes on the other side of the chest, or to distant organs. Many doctors also call cancer that has spread to the fluid around the lung as extensive stage.

If your cancer is limited stage, you might get radiation or chemotherapy (chemo) treatments to try to cure the cancer. An extensive-stage cancer will be treated, but is less likely to be cured. Be sure to ask your doctor about your cancer's stage and what it might mean.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage of the cancer?
- Would you explain to me what my stage means in my case?
- Based on the stage of the cancer, how long do you think I'll live?
- What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many ways to treat small cell lung cancer, but the main types of treatment are radiation, chemotherapy, and/or immunotherapy. In rare cases, surgery may be used. Many times, more than one kind of treatment is used.

The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- The stage of the cancer
- The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
- Your age
- Your other health problems
- Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that may come with it

If you need more information about possible side effects of treatment, see [Managing Cancer-related Side Effects](#)⁴.

Radiation treatment

[Radiation](#)⁵ uses high-energy rays (such as x-rays) to kill cancer cells. In limited-stage small cell lung cancer, it's most often used along with chemo to treat the tumor and lymph nodes in the chest. Or it could be used on the brain to try to keep the cancer from spreading there. Radiation can also be used to relieve symptoms, such as pain, bleeding, trouble swallowing, or other problems. It's usually given in small doses every day for many weeks.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation as your treatment, talk to him about what side effects might happen. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Sunburn-like skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)

Most side effects get better after treatment ends. Some might last longer. Talk to your doctor about what you can expect.

Chemo

[Chemo](#)⁶ (the short word for chemotherapy) is the use of drugs to fight cancer. It is most often the main treatment for small cell lung cancer. The drugs may be given through a needle into a vein or taken as pills. These drugs go into the blood and spread through

the body.

Chemo is given in cycles or rounds. There's often a rest period as part of each cycle of treatment. This gives the body time to recover. Treatment often lasts for many months.

Side effects of chemo

Chemo can make you feel very tired, feel sick to your stomach, and cause your hair to fall out. But these problems go away after treatment ends.

In most ways to treat most chemo side ef

There are ways to treat most chemo side effects. If you have any side effects, be sure to talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

Side effects of chemo

In most cases, you will not have [surgery](#)⁷ if you have small cell lung cancer. In a few

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

Clinical trials are one way to the newest cancer treatment. They are the best way for doctors to find better ways to treat cancer. If your doctor can find one that's studying the kind of cancer you have, it's up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials that might be right for you, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital conducts clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials](#)⁹ to learn more.

What about other treatments I hear about?

When you have cancer, you might hear about other ways to treat your cancer or treat your symptoms. These may not always be standard medical treatments. These treatments may be vitamins, herbs, diets, and other things. You may wonder about these treatments.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to be helpful. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you are thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What is the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, what will the surgery be like?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?
- What can I do about side effects that I might have?
- Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?
- What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if they are safe?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- What should I do to be ready for treatment?

- Is there anything I can do to help the treatment work better?
- What's the next step?

What will happen after treatment?

You'll be glad [when treatment is over](#)¹⁰. But it's hard not to worry about cancer coming back. Even when cancer never comes back, people still worry about this.

For years after treatment ends, you will still see your doctor. Be sure to go to all of these follow-up visits. You will have exams, blood tests, and maybe other tests to tell if the cancer has come back.

For the first year after treatment, your visits may be every 2 to 3 months. You may have CT scans and blood tests. After the first year or so, your visits might be every 6 months, and then at least once a year after 5 years.

Having cancer and dealing with treatment can be hard, but it can also be a time to look at your life in new ways. You might be thinking about how to improve your health. Call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 or talk to your cancer care team to find out what you can do to feel better.

You can't change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making healthy choices and feeling as well as you can.

For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/if-you-have-non-small-cell-lung-cancer-nsclc.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/how-diagnosed.html

3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging-sclc.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/treating-small-cell/radiation-therapy.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/treating-small-cell/chemotherapy.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/treating-small-cell/surgery.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/treating-small-cell/immunotherapy.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/after-treatment.html
11. www.cancer.org

Words to know

Biopsy (BY-op-see): Taking out a piece of tissue to see if there are cancer cells in it.

Bronchoscopy (brong-KOS-kuh-pee): Use of a thin, lighted, flexible tube that's passed through the mouth into the bronchi of the lungs. The doctor can look through the tube to find tumors or to take out a piece of tumor or fluids to test for cancer cells.

Bronchus (BRONG-kus) plural **bronchi** (BRONG-ki): In the lungs, the 2 main air passages leading from the windpipe or trachea. The bronchi are the tubes that allow air to move in and out of the lungs.

Metastasis (muh-TAS-tuh-sis): Cancer cells that have spread from where they started to other places in the body.

Trachea (TRAY-key-uh): The windpipe, or the main passage for air coming from the nose and mouth into the bronchi and lungs.

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org¹¹. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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