

Surgery for Cancer

Surgery can be used to prevent, diagnose, or treat cancer. Another reason surgery might be done is to help improve symptoms or take care of problems caused by cancer. Sometimes, surgery for cancer can be used for more than one reason.



How surgery can be used for cancer

- **To help prevent cancer:** Surgery helps prevent some cancers by removing things like a growth or a part of the body where cancer might start.
- **To diagnose cancer:** Surgery might be done to take out a small piece of tissue and test it. This is called a biopsy. Most of the time, doing a biopsy is the only way to know if a person has cancer and what type of cancer they have.
- **To find out the stage of a cancer:** Surgery might be used to look at parts of the body to find out how much cancer there is, if it has spread, or how much it has spread.
- **To treat cancer:** Surgery can be done to remove as much of the cancer as possible. Sometimes, surgery is the only treatment that's needed. Other times, treatments like radiation therapy or chemotherapy will be needed before or after surgery.
- **To help improve symptoms:** Surgery can be used to treat problems due to cancer, like pain or pressure caused by the tumor.



Getting ready for surgery

Here are a few things you may need to do to get ready for surgery:

- Tell your cancer care team about all the medications, vitamins, or supplements you are taking. You'll also need to tell your surgery team about these. They might tell you to stop taking some of them before surgery.
- You might need to get some blood tests, imaging tests like x-rays, or other tests before surgery.
- You might be told to stop eating and drinking for some time before surgery.
- You might be given medications to help empty your bowels before surgery.
- You might be given special instructions for showering or cleaning your skin before surgery.



Side effects of surgery

Side effects depend on what type of surgery is done. The most common side effects happen in the area of the body where the surgery was done, such as:

- Pain (this is very common)
- Infection
- Bleeding
- A scab or scar

Some other side effects might include:

- Blood clots
- Nausea or vomiting
- Damage to the skin, nearby tissues, or other body parts



Questions to ask

Here are some questions you can ask your doctor or health care team:

- Why do I need this surgery?
- What are the risks of this surgery?
- Are there any special things I need to do before surgery?
- Can I continue taking my usual medications and supplements before and after surgery?
- How long will the surgery take?
- Where will the surgery be done and how long will I need to be there?
- Do I need other treatments?
- How will I feel after surgery?
- What side effects could I have after my surgery?
- How will my side effects be managed and what can I do about them?
- When can I eat and drink after surgery? What can I eat or drink?
- Will I need to take any medicines after surgery?

- How long do I have to wait to get back to my normal activities?
- Will my insurance pay for this surgery? How much will I have to pay?
- When should I call the doctor?
- When do I need to see the doctor again?



When to call your doctor

Call your doctor or nurse if you notice any of these symptoms after having surgery:

- A temperature that is higher than normal (fever). Your doctor will tell you what temperature a fever is and when you need to call.
- Bleeding from where the surgery was done or anywhere else
- Pain where the surgery was done that is not controlled by the medicine you are given
- Headaches that are not normal for you, or pain that is not normal in your legs, chest, or belly
- Trouble breathing
- Trouble eating enough food or drinking enough fluids
- Pain when you empty your bladder or urine that smells bad or looks cloudy
- Being constipated or not able to move your bowels

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **cancer.org/surgery**.
We're here when you need us.

