

Early-stage Cancer Care: Patient Resource

Supporting patients and their whānau to understand
an early-stage cancer diagnosis



Models are
for illustrative
purposes only.



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Introduction

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be an overwhelming and distressing experience, filled with lots of emotions and questions. This booklet aims to provide valuable information and support for patients and their whānau (family) during their journey with early-stage cancer.

The booklet outlines the basics of:

- Understanding the different stages of cancer
- Pathways following an early-stage diagnosis
- Benefits versus risks of early-stage cancer treatment



It's a good idea to ask questions and seek support from your healthcare team, whānau, and fellow patients.

Understanding the different stages of cancer

Firstly, let's explain what cancer staging is. **Cancer staging is a way for doctors to describe the size and location of the cancer (or tumour), whether it has spread to nearby tissues or lymph nodes, and if it has spread to other organs.** It also helps doctors know how to best treat the cancer and what the outlook or prognosis might be.^{1,2}

To determine the stage, doctors use various tests such as imaging scans, lab tests, biopsies, as well as a physical exam.³

Doctors will then stage the cancer. Many different cancer staging systems are used. The TNM staging system is commonly used for many types of cancer, but there are also staging systems tailored for specific types of cancer.²

Ask your doctor about the type of staging system that is used for your cancer type.

— TNM staging

The TNM staging system is used for most types of cancers.² This system uses letters and numbers to describe how the cancer has grown and spread.²

T

measures the tumour's size and local growth.²

N

shows if nearby lymph nodes are involved.²

M

reveals if cancer has spread elsewhere in the body.²

Higher numbers mean more growth or spread.²

— Cancer stage grouping

Using the information collected to establish the TNM stage, the doctor will assign a specific stage to the cancer.¹ Most types of cancer are grouped into stages, numbered from 1 to 4 with some starting at Stage 0.²

It's important to note that some cancers use different staging systems, which may have differences in how stages are defined and named.²

Stage 1

At this stage, the cancer is small and localised, which means it is limited to the organ it started in.¹

Stage 2

Cancer at this stage may have grown larger than in Stage 1 but the cancer has not started to spread into nearby tissue. Sometimes the cancer may have spread to lymph nodes near the tumour.¹

Stage 3

At this stage, the cancer is generally larger and may have spread to nearby lymph nodes and surrounding tissues.¹

Stage 4

This stage, also known as metastatic or advanced cancer, indicates that the cancer has spread to other organs or other parts of the body.^{1,4}



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— Early-stage cancer

Early-stage cancer is used to describe cancer that is early in its growth, before it has spread to other parts of the body.^{5,6} Generally, Stage 4 cancers and some Stage 3 cancers are considered more advanced stages and not classified as early-stage cancers.^{4,7}

Everyone's situation is unique, so your doctor will explain your specific cancer stage and what it means for you.

Pathways following an early-stage cancer diagnosis

Once your cancer has been staged, this information will help you and your doctors decide which pathway is best suited for you.¹

In some early-stage cancers, treatment may not be done immediately and instead the doctors will monitor the cancer.⁸

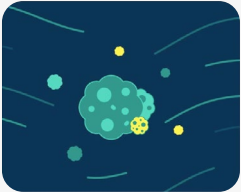
An ‘active surveillance’ approach means doctors monitor certain slow-growing cancers with regular tests and check-ups, and treatment is not required at the time.⁹⁻¹¹

Alternatively, ‘watchful waiting’ is a more passive approach for slow-growing cancers. It focuses on managing symptoms and providing supportive care as required, without regular monitoring.¹¹

Treatment for early-stage cancers commonly involves surgery and this may be the only form of treatment you require.¹²

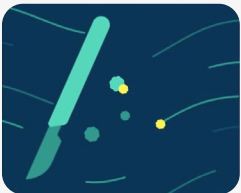
Other types of early-stage treatment (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or hormone therapy) may be used before surgery (neoadjuvant treatment), during surgery (simultaneous treatment), or after surgery (adjuvant treatment).¹²⁻¹⁴

Your healthcare team will guide you through your journey.
They are there to answer questions and provide support throughout.



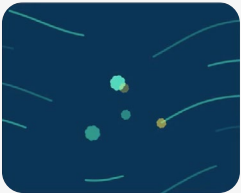
Neoadjuvant treatment

Neoadjuvant treatment is given before surgery with the aim of shrinking the tumour to make it easier to remove by surgery.¹²



Surgery

Surgery is a procedure to remove the part of the body containing the cancer.¹²



Adjuvant treatment

Adjuvant treatment is given after surgery with the aim to remove any remaining cancer cells. This may help to lower the risk of cancer returning in the future.^{12,13}



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Benefits versus risks of early-stage cancer treatment

Your healthcare team may outline some of the possible treatment options for you, as well as the potential risks (or side effects), the duration and frequency of treatment, the potential impact on your quality of life and the potential benefits of each option.



Don't be shy about asking questions.
The more you know, the better you can decide what's best for you.

When cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, when it is not too big and has not spread, it is more likely to be treated successfully.⁵

Detecting and treating cancer **early** may help:



Reduce the risk of the cancer coming back^{5,6}



Increase the potential for long-term survival⁵

— Side effects of cancer surgery

Your recovery after surgery will vary depending on your age, surgery type, and your overall health. It may take a few days to recover from a smaller operation while it could take a few months following a complex procedure. It is important to follow the advice of your surgeon and to take the time to fully recover.¹²

— Side effects of cancer drug treatment

You may experience side effects while undergoing cancer treatment.

Most side effects get better within the first few weeks or months of treatment; however, you may experience side effects later in your treatment course or even after treatment has ended.¹⁵



If you have concerns about your recovery after surgery, or you notice any side effects of treatment, it's important to let your healthcare team know.

Private versus public treatment options



Your healthcare team will talk with you and your whānau about the treatment options available and whether they are funded (available for free) or only available privately (paid for by you). This will help you and your whānau consider the options available to decide which is the most suitable treatment for you.



Use this space to record your notes, including information on your diagnosis and cancer stage.

What are the potential treatment pathways recommended by my doctor?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

What are the aims and risks of my treatment?

[illegible]

References: **1.** Cancer Research UK. Stages of Cancer. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/what-is-cancer/stages-of-cancer> Accessed on: September 08, 2023. **2.** National Cancer Institute. Cancer Staging. Available at: <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging> Accessed on: October 02, 2024. **3.** American Cancer Society. Cancer Staging. Available at: <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging.html> Accessed on: October 02, 2024. **4.** Cancer Society New Zealand. Understanding Lung Cancer. Section 3: Staging Lung Cancer. Available at: <https://www.cancer.org.nz/assets/Understanding-Lung-Cancer-booklet-2022-UPDATED.pdf> Accessed on: April 04, 2023. **5.** Cancer Research UK. Why is Early Cancer Diagnosis Important? Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/spot-cancer-early/why-is-early-diagnosis-important> Accessed on: September 08, 2023. **6.** National Breast Cancer Foundation. Stage 1 or 2 – Early Breast Cancer. Available at: <https://nbcf.org.au/about-breast-cancer/diagnosis/stage-1-2-early-breast-cancer/> Accessed on: September 08, 2023. **7.** Cancer Society of New Zealand. Living Well with Advanced Cancer. Available at: <https://www.cancer.org.nz/cancer/types-of-cancer/advanced-cancer/> Accessed on: October 26, 2023. **8.** Cancer Research UK. Active Surveillance and Watchful Waiting for Prostate Cancer. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/prostate-cancer/treatment/monitoring-prostate-cancer> Accessed on: July 9, 2025. **9.** Ministry of Health New Zealand. Guidance on Using Active Surveillance to Manage Men with Low-risk Prostate Cancer. Available at: <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2015-07/guidance-on-using-active-surveillance-to-manage-men-with-low-risk-prostate-cancer-jul15.pdf> Accessed on: October 02, 2024. **10.** Leukaemia and Blood Cancer New Zealand. Treatments. Available at: <https://www.leukaemia.org.nz/blood-cancer-information/active-monitoring?page=1> Accessed on: July 9, 2025. **11.** Prostate Cancer UK. Watchful Waiting. Available at: <https://prostatecanceruk.org/prostate-information-and-support/treatments/watchful-waiting> Accessed on: June 25, 2025. **12.** Cancer Council Australia. Understanding Surgery: A Guide for People with Cancer, Their Families and Friends, 2023. Available at: <https://www.cancer.org.au/assets/pdf/understanding-surgery-booklet> Accessed on: September 03, 2023. **13.** National Cancer Institute. NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms. Adjuvant Therapy. Available at: <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/adjuvant-therapy> Accessed on: June 26, 2019. **14.** National Cancer Institute. NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms. Neoadjuvant Therapy. Available at: <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/neoadjuvant-therapy> Accessed on: October 26, 2023. **15.** Cancer Society New Zealand. Getting on with Life After Treatment, 2013. Available at: <https://www.cancer.org.nz/assets/Downloads/Booklet-life-after-treatment.pdf> Accessed on: June 20, 2023.

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