

# What is cancer?



## Cancer facts

- All cancers are not the same.
- Cancer can be caused by smoking, other poisons, asbestos or the ultraviolet rays in sunlight although the exact cause of most cancers is unknown.
- Cancer can happen to anyone not just people who are unhealthy.
- Most cancers don't 'run' in families. However, there are genes that are passed on from parents that make it easier for cancer cells to grow.
- Cancer doesn't always cause death - many people survive cancer, especially if diagnosed early.
- Cancer is not a punishment for something you did wrong.

Being told you have or might have cancer is a shock for most people. Almost everyone knows someone who has had cancer.

## Cancer growth

Cancer can affect different organs and any part of the body.

Our bodies are made up of tiny cells that we can't see with our eyes. You need a microscope to see them. Cells make up our skin, our organs (i.e. liver, stomach, bowel and all other organs), our blood and our bones.

Normal cells grow in a cycle; they grow, divide, die and do that over and over again. Cancer cells are different; they grow and divide and keep growing and dividing and get out of control.

This is called abnormal cell growth. These abnormal cells that grow very fast and out of control are called cancer.

## Not all tumours are cancer

There are two kinds of tumours: benign and malignant.

**Benign** (be-nine) tumours do not spread to other parts of the body; they are not cancer.

**Malignant** (mal-ig-nant) tumours are cancer. They can spread to other parts of the body.

Tiny cancer cells may break away from the original cancer and spread:

- through the blood or lymphatic system (glands) to nearby organs
- to form new tumours in other areas of the body. This is called metastasis (meh-tas-tuh-sis) or secondary cancer.

## Who to speak to

If you have been told you have a cancer, a team of specialists will help treat you. You need to visit the Oncology (cancer) Department at a hospital.

Other words doctors might use to describe cancer:

- a growth
- disease
- neoplasm
- tumour (too-mer)
- mass or lump
- metastasis.

*This information has been adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Menzies School of Health Research in consultation with a Clinical Advisory Group and an Indigenous Consultation Group. Production by Cancer Council.*