

## Explaining Cancer-Related Terms to Children of All Ages

A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, especially when there are new words to learn. This can be particularly confusing when communicating to your children. If you encounter new terms and are unsure of how to explain them in a developmentally appropriate way, ask your doctor, nurse, or other health care team member at [UT Southwestern](#) for guidance.

The following are simple definitions of terms you might hear and want to use when talking to your child at different points during your cancer experience. Remember, children do not need every detail throughout your cancer experience. Provide simple and truthful explanations about your cancer diagnosis and treatment plan in a developmentally appropriate way, and allow them opportunities to ask questions so they can control how much or how little they want to know.

### ***Diagnostic Terms***

**Biopsy** – This is a procedure where doctors take a small amount of someone’s tissue and look at it under a microscope so they can learn more about what is going on inside someone’s body.

**Lumbar Puncture** – This is a procedure where the doctor uses a needle to remove a small amount of fluid from someone’s spine to help learn more about what is going on inside someone’s body.

### ***Cancer: General Terms***

**Acute** – When something is called “acute,” it means that it happened very quickly and usually lasts only a short amount of time.

**Bilateral** – This means that the cancer cells are on both sides of the body.

**Cancer** – When someone has cancer, it means they have cancer cells in their body. There are many different kinds of cancer, but it is important to know that you cannot “catch” cancer, and there is nothing you (the child) did to cause or make this happen.

**Cancer Cells** – We have millions of good cells in our body. Sometimes these cells start turning bad, and we do not always know why. These bad cells are called cancer cells. They grow very fast and have a different shape than normal cells.

**Chronic** – When something is called “chronic,” it means that it lasts for a long time. It is an illness that can come and go as well.

**Grade/Stage** – A doctor gives someone’s cancer a grade or stage to indicate how fast the cancer is growing and how strong the cancer is at that time. When someone has a lower grade/stage, it means the cancer cells are not as strong and they are growing more slowly. When someone has a higher grade/stage, it means the cancer cells are very strong and are growing very fast.

**Metastasis** – This means the cancer cells have spread to other parts of the body, outside of where the cancer cells were found in the beginning.

**Relapse** – This is what happens when someone has been through cancer treatment but the cancer cells come back.

**Remission** – This happens when someone’s cancer cells have gone away, usually after going through cancer treatment.

**Side Effects** – These are different symptoms that can happen due to the way someone is being treated for cancer. They are happening in response to the medicine/treatment, not the cancer itself. Some common side effects include fatigue/tiredness, nausea/vomiting, sensitivity to foods or smells, and hair loss.

**Tumor** – When a group of cells comes together in the body and creates a lump of cells, it’s called a tumor. Tumors can be cancerous or noncancerous.

### ***The Body***

**Blood** – Our blood, the natural fluid in our body, is made up of four types of cells -- red, white, plasma, and platelets. Our blood travels through the veins in our body.

**Bone Marrow** – This is the liquid inside of our bones that helps make our blood cells; it’s usually thick and spongy.

**Immune System** – This is the part of our body that helps fight off infections. The immune system is made up of two parts – white blood cells and lymph nodes.

**Immunosuppression or Immunocompromised** – This means that someone’s body is unable to fight off infections the way it is supposed to, usually because of really strong medicines that are helping to get rid of the bad cancer cells.

**Lymph Nodes** – These are the parts of our body that help get rid of germs. The lymph nodes are part of the immune system and are small round bumps under our skin that can’t be felt unless they are swollen. The bumps usually become swollen

when someone has an infection, but having swollen lymph nodes does not always mean someone has cancer.

**Neutropenia** – This occurs when the body is very low on white blood cells.

**Plasma** – This is the largest part of our blood; it helps hold all other parts of the blood together.

**Platelets** – These parts of our blood help our body clot and stop bleeding.

**Red Blood Cells** – These parts of our blood carry oxygen throughout our body and give us energy.

**Stem Cells** – When good cells are growing inside someone's bone marrow, they are called stem cells. These are new cells that will grow into either red blood cells, white blood cells, or platelets and then enter the blood to do their job.

**White Blood Cells** – These parts of our blood help fight off infections.

### ***Lines, Tubes, and Drains***

**Intravenous Line ("IV")** – This is a tiny tube that is inserted into someone's vein using a small needle. This helps the doctor give someone medicine, nutrition, or fluids (a big drink of water) directly into the blood. Once the tiny tube is inside of someone's vein, the needle is removed so only the tube stays inside the body. An IV helps get everything into the body faster, and it can stay in the body for several days.

**Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter ("PICC Line")** – A PICC line is a long, soft, thin, and flexible tube that is inserted in a vein in the arm and stops just above the heart. It works similar to an IV in that it is a way for doctors to give someone medicine, nutrition, or fluids (a big drink of water) directly into the blood. It helps get everything into the body faster, and a PICC line can stay in the body for weeks or months.

**Port-A-Cath ("Port")** – A port is a special kind of IV that is placed inside the body. It has two parts – the port itself and then the IV tube. The port is placed just under the skin, and the IV tube attached to the port goes into the vein that stops just above the heart. Similar to an IV and PICC line, this is a way for doctors to give someone medicine, nutrition, or fluids (a big drink of water) directly into the blood. It helps get everything into the body faster, and a port can stay in the body for months to years.

## ***General Forms of Treatment***

**Bone Marrow Transplant (BMT)** – This is a type of treatment where bone marrow that is no longer growing healthy stem cells is replaced (transplanted) with healthy bone marrow. The replaced bone marrow could come from someone's own body or from someone else called a donor.

**Chemotherapy** – This is a special kind of medicine that is used to help fight off the bad cancer cells. There are several types of chemotherapy and several different ways someone can receive it (IV, PICC line, port, or even in pill form).

**Clinical Trial** – A study that helps to determine if a new drug or form of treatment is helpful. Not everyone can enter a clinical trial

**Radiation** – This is a form of treatment that uses high-energy radiation to fight off cancer cells and make tumors smaller. The radiation comes through a special machine that knows how to pinpoint exactly what area of the body to treat.

**Stem Cell Transplant** – This is a type of treatment where stem cells that have been killed or hurt by chemotherapy or radiation are replaced (transplanted) with healthy stem cells. The replaced stem cells could come from someone's own body or from someone else called a donor.

## ***Providers/Treatment Team***

**Care Coordinator** – This is a registered nurse who can assist with some of the additional medical needs that accompany an illness, such as insurance, transitions in care, or medical equipment.

**Chaplain** – Also known as spiritual advisors or pastoral care, these trained professionals come from a variety of faith bases and can offer emotional or spiritual support, perform religious services, provide opportunities for prayer or meditation, and more. You do not have to be religious or spiritual to benefit from the support of a chaplain.

**Child Life Specialist** – This is someone who helps families going through a cancer experience when kids are involved in the family dynamic. They are professionally trained in child development and supporting children through medical experiences.

**Hematologist** – This is a doctor who specializes in blood and diseases of the blood.

**Music Therapist** – This is a trained professional who uses music-based interventions to help patients going through medical experiences.

**Occupational Therapist** – This trained professional focuses on fine motor skills, hand function, and activities of daily living.

**Oncologist** – This is a doctor who treats patients with cancer.

**Pathologist** – This is a doctor who studies cells and tissue samples under a microscope to help other doctors know what kind of disease or condition someone may have.

**Pet Therapy** – This involves a professionally trained handler and a dog, both of whom are equipped to support patients going through medical experiences.

**Physical Therapist** – This trained professional focuses on large motor skills, walking, and the body's overall ability to physically function on a day-to-day basis.

**Radiation Oncologist** – This is a doctor who not only treats patients with cancer but has extra training in using radiation.

**Social Worker** – This is a trained professional who can assist with the nonmedical needs that accompany an illness, such as with financial assistance, support groups, emotional support for caregivers, and additional resources for areas in which someone may need help.

**Speech Therapist** – This is a trained professional who focuses on talking and swallowing.