



Understanding Cancer Staging

Cancer staging describes how much cancer is present and where it is located in the body. Your cancer team determines the stage using information from imaging, biopsies, surgery, laboratory tests, and other testing.

Many cancers use the **TNM system**:

T = Tumor

Describes the size of the original tumor and/or how far it has grown into nearby tissues.

N = Nodes

Describes whether cancer has reached nearby (regional) lymph nodes.

M = Metastasis

Describes whether cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.

In general, a lower stage means the cancer is more limited to where it started, while a higher stage means it has grown more extensively or spread farther. However, stage is only one part of understanding cancer. Tumor biology, biomarkers, pathology results, overall health, and many other factors may affect treatment recommendations.

Colon Cancer Staging

Colon cancer staging depends largely on how deeply the cancer has grown through the wall of the colon, whether nearby lymph nodes contain cancer, and whether the cancer has spread to distant areas of the body.

Stage 0: Cancer Limited to the Inner Lining

- The cancer is at its earliest stage and is limited to the innermost lining of the colon.
- It has not grown into the deeper layers of the colon wall.
- This is also called carcinoma in situ.

Stage I: Cancer Has Grown Into the Colon Wall

The cancer has grown into the layers of the colon wall but has not spread to nearby lymph nodes or distant organs.

Stage II: Cancer Has Grown Through the Colon Wall

The cancer has grown farther through the wall of the colon but has not spread to regional lymph nodes or distant organs.

Stage II is divided into:

- **Stage IIA:** The cancer has grown through the muscular layer and into tissue surrounding the colon.
- **Stage IIB:** The cancer has reached or grown through the outer surface of the colon.
- **Stage IIC:** The cancer has grown into or become attached to a nearby organ or structure.

Stage III: Cancer Has Reached Nearby Lymph Nodes

The cancer has spread to regional lymph nodes and/or certain nearby tumor deposits, but there is no evidence that it has spread to distant organs.

Stage III is divided into **IIIA, IIIB, and IIIC** based on a combination of:

- How deeply the original tumor has grown
- How many regional lymph nodes contain cancer
- Whether certain tumor deposits are present

A higher Stage III category generally represents more extensive local or regional disease.

Stage IV: Metastatic Colon Cancer

The cancer has spread to a distant organ, distant site, and/or the lining of the abdominal cavity (peritoneum).

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- **Stage IVA:** Cancer has spread to one distant organ or site without spread to the peritoneum.
- **Stage IVB:** Cancer has spread to two or more distant organs or sites without spread to the peritoneum.
- **Stage IVC:** Cancer has spread to the peritoneal surface, either alone or along with other distant areas.

What Does My Stage Mean for Treatment?

Cancer stage is an important part of treatment planning, but your stage does not tell the whole story.

Treatment decisions may also depend on:

- The specific type and subtype of cancer
- Tumor biology and biomarkers
- Molecular or genetic testing
- Pathology results
- Your age and overall health
- Previous treatments
- Your personal goals and preferences

Two people with the same stage of cancer may therefore receive different treatment recommendations.

If you see letters and numbers such as T2N1M0 in your medical records, don't be alarmed by the terminology. These are simply a more detailed way for your healthcare team to describe where the cancer is located and how far it has spread.

Your oncology team can explain how your individual TNM classification, pathology results, biomarkers, and other testing come together to determine your stage and treatment options.

Educational Disclaimer

This information is intended for general education and should not replace individualized medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment recommendations from your treating healthcare team. Cancer staging can be complex and may change as additional imaging, pathology, surgical, or laboratory information becomes available.

Source: National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology and American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) staging systems. Guideline versions current as of September 2026.