



## 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.

# Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer (NSCLC) Staging

*Non-small cell lung cancer staging considers the size and location of the lung tumor, nearby structures, lymph nodes, and whether the cancer has spread outside the chest.*

## Stage 0: Cancer Has Not Invaded Lung Tissue (Carcinoma in situ)

- Cancer cells are found only in the surface layer where they began and have not invaded deeper lung tissue.

## Stage I: Early Lung Cancer

*The cancer is generally small, limited to the lung, and has not reached regional lymph nodes.*

Stage I is divided into:

- **Stage IA1, IA2, and IA3:** Very small tumors, with the category determined mainly by tumor size and specific tumor features.
- **Stage IB:** A somewhat larger tumor and/or a tumor with certain nearby local features, but without regional lymph node involvement.

## Stage II: Lung Cancer With More Local Growth or Limited Lymph Node Involvement

- Stage II may mean the tumor is larger or has certain local features, or that a smaller tumor has reached certain lymph nodes on the same side of the chest.
- Stage II is divided into **Stage IIA and Stage IIB**.

## Stage III: Locally Advanced Lung Cancer

*The cancer has not spread to distant parts of the body, but there is more extensive disease within the chest.*

This may involve:

- Larger tumors
- Growth into nearby structures
- More extensive lymph node involvement
- Lymph nodes in the center of the chest
- In some cases, lymph nodes on the opposite side of the chest or near the collarbone

Stage III is divided into **Stage IIIA, IIIB, and IIIC** based on the combination of tumor and lymph node involvement.

Because Stage III NSCLC includes many different situations, treatment can vary considerably from one person to another.

## Stage IV: Metastatic Lung Cancer

*The cancer has spread beyond the original lung and regional lymph nodes.*

**Stage IVA:** This can include cancer involving the opposite lung, cancerous fluid or tumor deposits around the lung or heart, or a single metastatic site outside the chest.

**Stage IVB:** There are multiple metastatic sites outside the chest, either within one organ system or involving multiple organ systems.

### **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.