



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.

Prostate Cancer Staging

Prostate cancer staging is somewhat different from many other cancers because the overall stage incorporates several pieces of information.

These include:

T: How far the tumor has grown within or outside the prostate

N: Whether regional lymph nodes contain cancer

M: Whether cancer has spread to distant areas

PSA: The prostate-specific antigen level

Grade Group: How the cancer cells look under the microscope

Stage I: Early Prostate Cancer

The cancer is limited to the prostate, with no regional lymph node or distant spread.

Stage I cancers have favorable features, including a PSA below 10 ng/mL and Grade Group 1.

Stage II: Cancer Still Confined to the Prostate

The cancer remains confined to the prostate and has not spread to regional lymph nodes or distant organs.

Stage II is divided into **IIA, IIB, and IIC** based mainly on the PSA level, Grade Group, and extent of the tumor within the prostate.

Stage IIA: Generally Grade Group 1 with a higher PSA or greater involvement of the prostate.

Stage IIB: Grade Group 2 disease.

Stage IIC: Grade Group 3 or 4 disease.

Stage III: Higher-Risk or Locally Advanced Prostate Cancer

There is still no regional lymph node or distant metastatic disease, but the cancer has one or more higher-risk features.

Stage IIIA: PSA is 20 ng/mL or higher, without regional lymph node or distant spread.

Stage IIIB: The cancer has grown outside the prostate and/or into nearby structures, but has not spread to regional lymph nodes or distant organs.

Stage IIIC: The cancer is Grade Group 5, regardless of PSA or local tumor category, as long as there is no regional lymph node or distant spread.

Stage IV: Prostate Cancer With Lymph Node or Distant Spread

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Stage IVA: Cancer has spread to regional lymph nodes, but there is no distant metastatic disease.

Stage IVB: Cancer has spread to a distant part of the body.

Distant metastatic prostate cancer can involve:

- Nonregional lymph nodes
- Bones (common)
- Other organs

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.