You have cancer.  

What does this mean?

The word cancer is used to describe a process in which cells grow out of control and eventually crowd out normal cells, causing damage to the body.

Cancer can occur in almost any cell in the body. It begins with damage to the DNA. DNA controls the functions of a cell, telling it when to divide (reproduce) and when to die. If the DNA is damaged, the cells begin to divide uncontrollably and rapidly, and they can outlive normal cells. Most of the time, the body’s immune system recognizes these damaged cells and gets rid of them. If this does not happen, cancer can develop.

Other types of cancer cells can grow in the lymph and blood systems. They do not form tumors, but blood and lymph cancer cells can grow out of control and squeeze out normal cells.

A tumor is a collection of cells. A tumor can be benign or malignant. Benign tumors are non-cancerous. They can grow, but they do not invade surrounding tissues or travel to other areas of the body. Malignant tumors are cancerous. They are made up of cells that look very different from the normal cells in an organ. Sometimes cancer cells move into or invade nearby tissues. They can also travel to areas away from the original (primary) site and grow in other parts of the body. This is called metastasis.

Why me?

How did I get cancer?

Every patient wants to know the answer to this question. Unfortunately, the reasons people develop cancer are not well understood. There are known carcinogens, which are materials that can cause cancer, but many are still undiscovered. We do not know why some people who are exposed to carcinogens get cancer and others do not. The length and amount of exposure are believed to affect one’s chances of developing a disease, such as with cigarette smoking and lung cancer. Genetics also plays a role. For example, heredity is a risk factor for some kinds of breast cancer.
Specific cancers are named for the primary site (where the first abnormal cells develop) and the type of body tissue involved. Most cancers fit into the following categories:

- **Carcinoma** – cancers of the tissues that cover or line a cavity of the body, such as skin, stomach, or throat
- **Sarcoma** – cancers of the tissues that support, connect, or surround other tissues, such as muscles and bones
- **Myeloma** – cancers of the bone marrow
- **Lymphoma** – cancers of the lymph system, the network of vessels and nodes that carries lymph fluid throughout the body
- **Leukemia** – cancers of the blood or blood-forming organs

**Staging and Grading**

Part of the process of diagnosing cancer involves the staging and grading of the disease. Staging is a system that describes how far the cancer has spread. Grading is a system that describes the aggressiveness of the cancer. (Keep in mind that some cancers are not staged.) These measurements are used to determine which treatment option will work best for a patient.

There are many staging systems, but TNM is the most common. “T” refers to the size of the tumor, “N” to the number of lymph nodes involved, and “M” to metastasis. TNM staging measures the extent of the disease. Generally, the lower the stage, the better the treatment prognosis (outcome).

- **Stage 0** – pre-cancer
- **Stage 1** – small cancer found only in the organ where it started
- **Stage 2** – larger cancer that may or may not have spread to the lymph nodes
- **Stage 3** – larger cancer that is also in the lymph nodes
- **Stage 4** – cancer in a different organ from where it started

Grading refers to the cancer cells themselves. When doctors look at cancer cells under the microscope, they compare how different they look from normal cells. This is called differentiation. The higher the grade, the worse the prognosis.

Here is the AJCC (American Joint Commission on Cancer) grading system:

- **GX** – grade cannot be assessed
- **G1** – well-differentiated; the cancer cells look fairly normal
- **G2** – moderately differentiated; the cells are less normal in appearance but still have some recognizable structures
- **G3** – poorly differentiated; the cells have a bizarre pattern, very different from normal cells
- **G4** – undifferentiated; the cells are in a completely unrecognizable pattern
What are the treatment options?

There are several ways to treat cancer, and new options are being researched every day. Possible treatment options include:
- Surgery
- Chemotherapy
- Radiation
- Biological therapies
- Hormonal therapies
- Bone marrow and stem cell transplants

Cancer can be treated with one of these methods, or a combination of two or more. The treatment you receive depends on the type of cancer you have and how far advanced it is. Other health conditions you have and your individual preferences can also influence your treatment plan. You and your doctor will explore all of your options and make the decision that is best for you.

It is helpful to know your cancer diagnosis, stage, and grade when discussing your diagnosis and treatment plan with members of your healthcare team.

Record this important information here.

My diagnosis:

______________________________
______________________________
______________________________

Date: ________________________
Stage: _______________________
Grade: _______________________

Notes: