

# Treating Stomach Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'Treating stomach cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

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## The stages of stomach cancer

The stage of a cancer tells the doctor how far it has spread. It is important because treatment is often decided according to the stage of a cancer. Doctors mainly use the TNM staging system and the number staging system.

## The TNM stages of stomach cancer

The TNM system is the system most commonly used in cancer. 'TNM' stands for

Tumour, Node, Metastasis. This system describes the extent of the primary tumour (T), the absence or presence of cancer in nearby lymph nodes (N), and the absence or presence of distant metastases (M).

## Number stages of stomach cancer

There are 5 main stages in the number system – 0 to 4. CancerHelp UK has details of the TNM and number stages of stomach cancer.

## Statistics and outlook for stomach cancer

Outlook means your chances of getting better. Your doctor may call this your prognosis. As with many other types of cancer, the outcome of stomach cancer depends on how advanced it is when it is diagnosed.

On CancerHelp UK, we have quite detailed information about the likely outcome of different stages of stomach cancer. The statistics we use are taken from a variety of different sources, including the opinions and experience of the experts who check each section of CancerHelp UK. They are intended as a general guide only. For the more complete picture in your case, you'd have to speak to your own specialist.



## How reliable are cancer statistics?

No statistics can tell you what will happen to you. The statistics cannot tell you about the different treatments people may have had, or how that treatment may have affected their prognosis. There are many individual factors that will affect your treatment and your prognosis.

## Which treatment for stomach cancer?

The treatment options for stomach cancer are surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. When planning your treatment, your doctors will take into account the stage of your cancer, your general health, your age and level of fitness. As with many types of cancer, the earlier your cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to get it under control and possibly cure it.

If your cancer is diagnosed before it has spread, you will almost certainly have surgery. If it is possible to try to cure your stomach cancer, you will have all or part of your stomach removed. How much is removed will depend on where in the stomach the cancer is. Even if your stomach cancer cannot be cured, you may need surgery to relieve symptoms.

You may have chemotherapy on its own, or with surgery. You are most likely to have chemotherapy on its own if your cancer is advanced and has already spread. The treatment can often relieve symptoms and may slow your cancer down. If a cancer has grown locally, but not spread to another organ, you may have chemotherapy before or after surgery to lower the risk of the cancer coming back. If your cancer has receptors for the biological therapy trastuzumab (Herceptin) you may

have Herceptin combined with chemotherapy treatment.

Radiotherapy is not routinely used to treat stomach cancer. You may have radiotherapy after surgery to help stop your cancer coming back. This should be within a clinical trial as it is still an experimental treatment.

## Surgery to remove stomach cancer

The type of operation you have to remove your stomach cancer will depend on where in the stomach the cancer is. You may have part or all of your stomach removed. If your cancer is near where your stomach is joined to your gullet (oesophagus) you may need part of your gullet removed as well. These are all major operations. Find out more information about each of these operations on CancerHelp UK.

If your cancer has spread to another part of your body, you are less likely to have any of these operations as they will not cure your cancer. But you may have an operation to bypass or remove part of the tumour if it is blocking your gullet (oesophagus) or stomach.

## What happens if my stomach is removed?

If only part of your stomach is removed you will have to eat small amounts of food more often, at least for a while, until your system learns to cope with a smaller stomach capacity.

If your whole stomach is removed, you may eventually return to eating normally, but this will take longer. You will also have to have injections of vitamin B12 for the rest of your life to prevent anaemia and nerve



problems. On CancerHelp UK we have more information about diet after stomach surgery.

### **Surgery to relieve symptoms of stomach cancer**

Even if your cancer cannot be cured, you may need surgery to relieve symptoms from a blocked or partly blocked stomach.

Sometimes stomach cancer can grow so that it blocks, or partly blocks, the passage of food through your digestive system. This can make you feel full after eating only small amounts. It can also cause pain, sickness, vomiting and constipation. To relieve these symptoms, or stop them getting worse, you may be offered an operation to remove part or all of your stomach to relieve the blockage.

Another type of surgery that is sometimes used is called a bypass. It involves attaching part of the stomach above the blockage directly to the first part of the small bowel. The food can then move through the digestive system to the bowel.

All these operations are long and complicated. It is important that you know all the options for treatment and your doctor will discuss these with you. Don't be afraid to ask any questions you may have. It often helps to write down a list of questions that you want to ask.

### **Having your operation for stomach cancer**

Before your surgery, you will need further tests to make sure you are fit enough for your anaesthetic and to make a good recovery from your surgery. These may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, tests to check how well your lungs are working, and

a heart trace (ECG) while you are exercising. You will also need to learn breathing and leg exercises.

### **At the hospital**

When you go into hospital, your surgeon, anaesthetist, physiotherapist and nurse will all come to talk to you. The surgeon will give you details of what to expect. Ask as many questions as you want.

### **After the operation**

When you wake up, you are likely to have several tubes in place to give you fluids and blood transfusions and to drain the wound, drain your urine, and drain fluid from your stomach to stop you feeling sick. You will almost certainly have pain for the first week or so. Tell your doctor or nurse who will work with you to find the right painkiller for you.

You will not be able to eat at first. After a few days you will gradually be able to start drinking and eating. At first, it may be easier to have lots of very small meals rather than 3 large meals a day. The hospital dietician will give you help and advice with managing your diet.

### **Questions for your doctor about surgery for stomach cancer**

- Is it possible for me to have an operation to try to cure my cancer?
- Why do I need an operation?
- Which type of operation should I have and why?
- What are the risks and benefits of having this operation?
- Will the operation cure the cancer?
- What are the long-term effects of this operation?



- When I wake up, will I be in intensive care?
- Will I have pain after this operation?
- How long will I have a drip after surgery?
- When will I be able to start eating again?
- Will I be able to eat and drink normally after this operation?
- Will I get help with my diet after the operation?
- What are the possible complications of this type of operation?
- Will I need any other treatment as well as surgery?
- Is there any treatment I can have instead of surgery?
- What will happen if I don't have the operation?
- How long will it take me to get better?
- How can I help myself get over the operation?

### About chemotherapy for stomach cancer

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer or 'cytotoxic' drugs to destroy cancer cells. You may have chemotherapy for stomach cancer as a combination of tablets, a drip, an injection, or through a small pump as a slow continuous infusion. How you have your chemotherapy treatment will depend on the particular drug or combination of drugs you are having.

### Chemotherapy before or after surgery

You might have chemotherapy before surgery to try to shrink your stomach cancer so it can be operated on more easily. Or you might have it after surgery to try to stop the cancer coming back.

### Shrinking an inoperable cancer

If your cancer is thought to be too large to remove completely, your doctor may suggest chemotherapy to try to shrink it. Or you might have chemotherapy after surgery if your surgeon could not remove all of your stomach cancer.

### Chemotherapy to relieve symptoms

If you have advanced stomach cancer, your doctor might suggest chemotherapy to try to shrink the cancer, slow it down, or relieve any symptoms you are having.

For more information, look in the 'chemotherapy' section of CancerHelp UK.

### Chemotherapy drugs used for stomach cancer

Doctors most often use combinations of chemotherapy drugs together. Which drugs you have will depend on why you are having the treatment.

The most commonly used drug combinations for stomach cancer before or after surgery are ECF (epirubicin, cisplatin and 5FU) and ECX (epirubicin, cisplatin and capecitabine). You have ECF by injection and through a portable pump. You will need a central line. This is a tube that goes into a main blood vessel in your neck. You may have up to 4 to 6 months of treatment, depending on how your cancer responds.

If you have ECX, you have 2 of the drugs into a vein and the other as a tablet. CancerHelp UK has information about these and other combinations of chemotherapy drugs used for stomach cancer.



Chemotherapy side effects vary, depending on the particular drugs you are having. The commonest side effects are a drop in your blood counts, causing an increased risk of infection, feeling or being sick, hair loss, diarrhoea and sore mouth.

### Questions for your doctor about chemotherapy for stomach cancer

- Why do you think I need to have chemotherapy?
- What will the chemotherapy do for me?
- How will I have the chemotherapy?
- Should I have a central line put in?
- Will I need a general anaesthetic?
- What will the side effects be?
- How long will the treatment last?
- How and when will you know if it's working?
- How often will I have to come to the hospital?
- Will I have to stay in hospital overnight?
- Is it possible to get help with fares or transport to and from the hospital?
- Is there anything I will have to do at home (for example change the chemotherapy bags in a pump)?
- What if I cannot manage?
- What can I eat and drink when on chemo?
- Can I go on holiday?
- Are there any long term effects of this treatment?
- Is there a clinical trial that is suitable for me?

### Radiotherapy for stomach cancer

Radiotherapy uses high-energy waves to kill cancer cells. Doctors don't usually use radiotherapy for stomach cancer. But you may have it for symptoms of an advanced

cancer. Radiotherapy may shrink a large cancer and relieve pain. It is also useful for stopping bleeding from an advanced cancer.

You have radiotherapy at the hospital radiotherapy department. You might have radiotherapy for symptoms over a small number of treatments. You may have one treatment a day for a few days, or a few treatments with a few days break between each. The actual treatment only lasts a few minutes.

### Side effects

The side effects of radiotherapy depend on which part of the body is being treated. The side effects of treatment to the stomach are tiredness, feeling or being sick, diarrhoea, reddening of the skin in the treatment area and loss of body hair in the treatment area. You may not have many side effects from your treatment if you are having it for advanced stomach cancer.

You can find more information in the 'radiotherapy' section of CancerHelp UK.

### Controlling symptoms of advanced cancer

If you have advanced stomach cancer it is not generally possible to cure it. Advanced stomach cancer means the cancer has spread from where it started in the stomach or has come back some time after you were first treated. Stomach cancer can spread to lymph nodes, the liver and to the inside of the abdomen. Less commonly, it can spread to the lung. You may also be told your cancer is advanced if it is too large to be removed when you are first diagnosed.

Even if your advanced stomach cancer can't be cured, there is treatment available to



control your symptoms. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery can all be used to treat advanced stomach cancer. Which treatment is best for you depends on the size of the cancer, where it is, whether it has spread to another part of your body, the treatment you have already had and your general health.

It can be difficult to decide which treatment to try, or whether to have treatment at all when you have an advanced cancer. Your doctor or clinical nurse specialist will discuss the options for treatment with you. If you would like to talk things through with someone outside your circle of family and friends, ask your doctor or nurse about counselling services.

### Follow up for stomach cancer

After your treatment has finished, your doctor will want you to have regular check ups. Your doctor will examine you and ask how you are feeling, whether you have had any symptoms and if you are worried about anything. You will probably have blood tests. You might have a scan or endoscopy once a year at first. Or sooner if there are signs that your cancer could be active again.

If you are worried or notice any new symptoms between appointments, you must let your doctor know as soon as possible. You don't have to wait until the next appointment.

### Feeling anxious

Many people find their check ups quite worrying. If you are feeling well and getting on with life, a hospital appointment can bring all the worry about your cancer back to you. It is quite common nowadays for people to have counselling after cancer treatment. To find out more about

counselling, look in the 'coping with cancer' section of CancerHelp UK.

### Stomach cancer research

All treatments must be fully researched before they can be adopted as standard treatment for everyone. This is so that we can be sure they work better than the treatments we already use. And so we know they are safe. First of all, treatments are developed and tested in laboratories. Only after we know that they are likely to be safe to test are they tested in people, in clinical trials.

Researchers are looking into prevention and causes of stomach cancer, finding out how far a cancer has grown, surgery, chemotherapy, biological therapies, controlling symptoms and preventing weight loss.

### Questions for your doctor about treatment for stomach cancer

- What can you tell me about the stage of my cancer?
- What type of treatment do I need?
- If you are not sure about the stage, when will you know?
- How do you tell the stage of the cancer?
- What written information can you give me about these treatments?
- Is there any choice of treatments?
- Should I have any treatment before surgery?
- Should I have any other treatment after surgery?
- What are the risks and benefits of these treatments?
- What are the side effects?
- How can I help to reduce the side effects?



- How often will I have to come to the hospital for treatment?
- Is there any transport available?
- Is it possible to have any help with the cost of fares to the hospital?
- How long will the treatment last?
- Can I have a second opinion?
- Are there any experimental treatments or trials that might help me?
- Is there a counsellor here I could talk things through with?
- How often will you see me when my treatment is finished?
- What will happen at my follow up appointments?
- What should I do if I am worried between appointments?
- How often will I have scans?

### More information

For more information about stomach cancer, visit our website <http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in July 2010. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2010 Cancer Research UK Charity Number 1089464