

## Demystifying Cancer Staging Narration

When someone receives a cancer diagnosis, they may also get details about the cancer **stage**. Cancer staging is a way to describe the extent of cancer in the body. It helps your healthcare team understand how much cancer is present, where it is located, and how far it has spread. This helps guide treatment decisions and gives an idea of what to expect. Cancer staging can sometimes be complex and confusing, so we will break it down in this lesson.

Before discussing the details of cancer staging, let's review why cancer staging is important.

### Why is Cancer Staging Important?

Understanding your cancer stage helps you and your medical team:

- ✓ Identify the best treatment options tailored to your needs.
- ✓ Determine whether the cancer is metastatic.
- ✓ Explore eligibility for clinical trials.

Ultimately, staging provides clarity and direction, empowering you to make informed decisions about your care.

To stage cancer, your medical team must first **diagnose** the disease. Cancer diagnosis involves tests such as:

- Physical exams where doctors look for signs of cancer, which may include changes in weight, skin colour or the enlargement of an organ.
- Imaging tests where radiologists use CT scans, MRIs, X-rays, ultrasounds, or PET scans to look at areas of interest inside the body.
- And molecular pathology tests where tissues are analyzed to detect cancer and understand the type of cancer cells that may be present. These tests can be performed on either solid tumour tissue or liquid biopsies performed on blood, urine, saliva or other fluids.

Pathologists and molecular pathologists play crucial roles in cancer diagnosis. They **analyze tissue samples** obtained to determine the type of cancer cells involved and whether there are any biomarkers that can guide treatment. This information is used to create a pathology report, which is a key document in cancer staging.

Once cancer is diagnosed, the **stage** can be determined. There are a few different staging systems, however the most common is the TNM staging system.

#### a) TNM Staging System

The TNM system focuses on three key factors; T (Tumor); which looks at the size and extent of the primary tumor. N (Nodes), to determine whether cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes, and M (Metastasis); to classify if cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.

The TNM system helps doctors understand cancer trends in large groups of patients but doesn't always provide the full picture for individual patients. A more personalised approach is stage grouping, which is based on the TNM system.

b) Stage I-IV System.

Stage grouping simplifies the TNM staging system by using stages 0 to IV, with stage IV being the most advanced. Stage 0 refers to carcinoma in situ, which isn't considered cancer but could develop into one.

This table provides more detail on each stage; higher numbers indicate more advanced stages, with letters and numbers often adding detail.

Stage 0 - Indicates carcinoma in situ.
Stage I - Localized cancer.
Stage II - Locally advanced cancer, early stages.
Stage III - Locally advanced cancer, late stages.
Stage IV - Metastatic cancer.

- Localized: Cancer is confined to its starting point.
- Regional: Cancer has spread to nearby tissues or lymph nodes.
- Distant: Cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.

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It is important to know that not all cancers follow the same staging system. For example, blood cancers are staged based on cell type and genetic changes, while brain cancers focus more on tumour location and grade rather than how far they've spread.

Different types of cancer, and even different hospitals, may use different staging methods. That's why it's essential to understand the system your medical team is using and how it applies to your cancer care.

## Conclusion

Cancer staging is a vital part of the cancer care process. While it may seem complex, understanding the basics can help you feel more confident and engaged in your cancer care.

Every cancer case is unique, and your medical team is there to guide you. Don't hesitate to ask questions and seek clarity about your cancer stage and what it means for your prognosis and treatment.

If there are any of the terms discussed that you would like to learn more about, please consult our enhanced glossary!