

Women's Cancer Information Project

Coordinated by the European Institute of Women's Health

CanCom: Cancer Definitions

This page explains most of the medical terminology used in the text of the CanCom project.

Acute – Occurring suddenly or over a short period of time.

Alopecia – Loss of hair. Caused by radiotherapy to the head and by certain drugs. Hair will regrow on cessation of treatment.

Anaesthetic – Drugs to put patient to sleep (general), or to numb part of the body (local).

ANAEMIA – A condition where the concentration of red cells or haemoglobin in the blood is lower than the normal healthy level. Symptoms include frequent tiredness, muscle weakness or dizziness.

ANTIBODIES – These are naturally occurring proteins that are created by the body on exposure to any [antigen](#) (e.g. measles virus, chickenpox, etc.), and which help the body to fight disease.

Antigen – A foreign protein, e.g. a bacterium or virus, which stimulates the production of [antibodies](#)

BENIGN – A tumour or growth that is non-cancerous. Outlook for recovery is favourable.

Biopsy – The removal and examination of a piece of tissue from the body for diagnostic purposes.

Blast Cells – An immature stage of cellular development. Commonly applied to leukaemia cells seen on examination of a sample of blood or bone marrow.

Blood Count – Term used to describe the blood test which assesses the number of different cells contained in a sample of blood.

Bone Marrow – The substance at the centre of the large bones in the body which makes blood cells. A sample may be taken by the doctor from one of the bones in the hip or leg, to determine the health of the bone marrow. Such examinations are performed under local anaesthetic.

Broviac Catheter (used in children) – A long thin tube which is inserted into a large vein in the neck. The tip of the tube lies in the heart. All blood samples can be taken from the Broviac and all medications and transfusions can be given through it, thus avoiding the need for needles and cannulae. The Broviac can be left in place for as long as is needed.

Cannula – A short plastic tube which is inserted into a vein for the administration of medication or transfusions. If a Broviac catheter is inappropriate, or a child does not opt for it, a cannula will be used.

Carcinogen – A cancer causing agent

C.A.T. Scan – Computerised Axial Tomography: An X-ray procedure in which a computer is used to generate a three-dimensional image. Used at diagnosis to measure the extent of a tumour and during treatment to estimate response to therapy. Depending on the site to be scanned, you might need to fast.

Cerebrospinal Fluid – The fluid produced within the brain that bathes the brain and spinal cord.

CERVIX – The cervix is the cone-shaped opening to the womb (or uterus). It allows for menstrual blood to pass from the womb to the vagina and it also allows for the passage the baby from the womb to the vagina during birth.

CERVICAL SMEAR – An examination during which a small scraping of cells is taken from the neck of the womb. The cells are then checked under a microscope, to see if any could later change to cancer.

CHEMOTHERAPY – A cancer treatment that uses drugs to destroy cancer cells. It stops them from multiplying at points in cells life cycle. Drugs can be orally (mouth) or intravenously (into the vein) given to patients.

C.N.S. – Central Nervous System – refers to the brain and spinal cord.

CLITORIS – A small body of spongy tissue which is highly sexually sensitive.

Cyto- – To do with cells

Diuretic – A drug or substance used to help get rid of extra fluid, by passing more urine.

DNA – the genetic material which makes up genes; genes contain complete instructions telling the cells of the body how to function and how to behave.

Dysfunction – Not working properly.

***E.C.G.** – Electrocardiogram. This test records electrical changes in the heart muscle. It is often used to assess the effect (if any) that a particular drug may have on the heart.

***E.E.G.** – Electroencephalogram. This test records electrical events in the brain. It is used to determine brain function.

* Both of these tests are painless. Electrical sensors will be attached to the body but will not cause any discomfort.

Endocrine – To do with hormones.

ENDOMETRIUM – This is the inner lining of the uterus which is constantly being built up and prepared for a fertilised egg or broken down and shed if fertilisation does not occur.

FALLOPIAN TUBES – These are a pair of tubes on either side of the uterus. Each tube serves as a passage through which the egg is carried to the womb, and through which the sperm is carried to the ovary.

G-CSF – Granulocyte Stimulating Factor. This substance, which occurs naturally in the body, is occasionally used to stimulate the production of neutrophils.

G.F.R. – Glomerular Filtration Rate. This test is given to assess how well the kidneys are functioning. Three injections will be given at two hourly intervals.

Haematologist – A physician who specialises in examining blood samples and treating leukaemia.

Haematology – The study of blood and blood-forming organs.

Haemorrhage – Bleeding

Hickman Catheter (used in adults) – A long thin tube which is inserted into a large vein in the neck. The tip of the tube lies in the heart. All blood samples can be taken from the Hickman and all medications and transfusions can be given through it, thus avoiding the need for needles and cannulae. The Hickman can be left in place for as long as is needed.

Home Care Team – This is a team of specialist staff set up to offer advice and support to patients, their families and to health care professionals. They do this by complementing the skills and resources of the primary care team thus helping families to care for the patient at home for as long as possible.

Immune System – The body's natural defence mechanism against disease and infection.

Immuno-suppressive – Lowering the body's defence mechanisms, e.g. with chemotherapy.

In-Patient Hospice Unit – An in-patient hospice unit offers specialist palliative care for patients and their families. It has staff who are specialists in [Palliative Care](#), and a high ratio of nursing staff to patients.

I.V. – Intravenous. The administration of drugs or fluids into a vein.

I.V.P. – Intravenous Pyelogram. An x-ray examination of the kidneys which requires an injection into a vein of a substance that will be visible on x-ray. You will need special preparation for this procedure. Please check with ward staff.

Isotope Scan – A procedure for examining bones, liver, spleen, thyroid, etc. You will be given an injection of a radioactive substance and the uptake by the tissue is measured.

LABIA – The labia protect the vagina, urethra and the clitoris, they are sometimes known as the "lips" of the vulva.

L.P. – Lumbar Puncture. May be referred to as an L.P. or spinal tap. A diagnostic procedure to obtain a specimen of spinal fluid for examination. One or more drugs may be administered via the spinal needle. Children usually fast for a minimum of four hours before this procedure to facilitate the giving of an anaesthetic agent. Sometimes you may develop a headache following this procedure.

Lymphoma – A cancer affecting the lymphoid organs, i.e. the lymph nodes, spleen, thymus.

Lymph Nodes – Bean-shaped structures scattered along vessels of the lymphatic system. May become enlarged due to infection or invasion by cancer cells.

MALIGNANT – A tumour or growth that is cancerous.

Metastases – Also known as secondary tumours, they are cancerous growths that started from cancer cells shed by a primary cancer in another part of the body.

M.R.I. Scan – Magnetic Resonance Imaging Scan. This scan is used to obtain three-dimensional images of a tumour and to assess response to treatment. The images are obtained using a high powered magnet. No x-rays are involved.

Nausea – A sick feeling.

Neuro- – To do with the nervous system or nerves.

Neutropaenic – A patient who has a very low neutrophil white cell count in the blood and is

at high risk of bacterial infection .

Neutrophil – A special white cell identified in the blood count. These cells are a very important defence against bacterial infection .

Oedema – Swelling caused by fluid accumulation in tissues.

Oncologist – A physician who specialises in cancer care.

Ophthalmology – The study of the eyes.

OVARIES – The ovaries are situated at the end of the fallopian tubes. They have two functions-they produce eggs which travel to the uterus and they also produce the female sex hormones (oestrogen and progesterone).

Paediatric – Relating to children

Palliative Care – "This is the continuing active total care of patients and their families by a multiprofessional team at a time when the medical expectation is not cure and the primary aim of treatment is no longer to prolong life. The goal of Palliative Care is the highest possible quality of life for both patient and family. Palliative care responds to physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs. If necessary, it extends to support in bereavement." (*European Community, Europe Against Cancer Committee*) .

Petechiae – Tiny haemorrhages from small blood vessels just beneath the skin surface.

Platelet – One of the components of blood that forms clots and prevents bleeding.

PRE-CANCER – This is a change in the cells of a particular organ, for example the lungs, which looks like true cancer but do not attack the body as true cancer does. This change can last for many years giving time for early detection.

Primary – The original site of the tumour.

Prognosis – The long term expected outlook or outcome of a disease.

Protocol – The treatment plan devised by doctors.

Prosthesis – An artificial replacement, for example, of a bone or an eye or breast.

Pulmonary – To do with the lungs.

RADIATION THERAPY – A cancer treatment which uses high energy radiation (x-rays) to cure cancer or alleviate pain.

Radiotherapist – The radiotherapist plans and arranges radiotherapy which is treatment using high energy radiation from x-ray machines, cobalt, radium or other sources.

Radiotherapy – Treatment using high energy radiation from x-ray machines. cobalt. radium or other sources.

Red Blood Cells – These carry oxygen around the body. Haemoglobin is the colouring matter of the red cells.

Relapse – The return of symptoms of a disease after a period of good health; the further occurrence of a tumour after treatment.

Remission – A period of good health where there is no detectable evidence of disease or tumour.

Sarcoma – A tumour which forms in bone or muscles.

Stomatitis – Inflammation of the lining of the mouth. Always report this.

T.P.N. – Total Parenteral Nutrition. The giving of nutrients intravenously. Used where a person is unable to take food in the normal way.

Tumour – An abnormal lump of tissue formed by a collection of cells. It may be benign or malignant

UTERUS – The uterus or womb is a pear-shaped, thick-walled muscular organ. It is two and a half inches in diameter and is located in the lower abdominal region. When a woman is pregnant, the foetus grows inside the uterus.

VAGINA – The vagina or the "birth canal" is the passageway through which the fluid passes out of the body during periods and through which a woman gives birth.

VULVA – The vulva is the name for all the female external organs including the labia, the clitoris and the vaginal opening.

White Blood Cells – These are components of blood which are involved in the body's defence against infection.

WOMB – The womb is a pear-shaped, thick-walled muscular organ. It is two and a half inches in diameter and is located in the lower abdominal region. When a woman is pregnant, the baby grows inside the uterus. **To get back to the page you were looking at, click the left-arrow button on your Web browser.**
