



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for

Gynaecological Cancers

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

Glossary

A

abdomen	The part of the body that includes the stomach, intestine, liver, bladder and kidneys. The abdomen is located between the ribs and hips.
acute pain	Pain that is severe but lasts a short time.
adenocarcinoma	A cancer that starts in the cells of glands.
adjuvant therapy or adjuvant treatment	Treatment given after the primary treatment to increase the chances of a cure. In cancer, adjuvant treatment often refers to chemotherapy, hormonal therapy or radiotherapy after surgery, which is aimed at killing any remaining cancer cells.
adenopathy	Large or swollen lymph glands.
advanced care directive	The legal documents in which you give written instructions about your health care if, in the future, due to the state of your health, you cannot speak for yourself.
advanced cancer	Cancer that has spread past the site of origin to other organs.
alternative therapy	Therapy used instead of standard medical treatment. Most alternative therapies have not been scientifically tested, so there is little proof that they work and their side effects are not always known. Examples include laetrile, shark cartilage, mistletoe extract, ozone therapy, magnets, taking large doses of vitamin supplements, coffee enemas, microwave therapy, resveratrol and melatonin.
anaemia	A drop in the number of red blood cells in your body. Anaemia decreases the amount of oxygen in the body and may cause tiredness and fatigue, breathlessness, paleness and a poor resistance to infection.
anaesthetic	A drug that stops a person feeling pain during a medical procedure. A local anaesthetic numbs only a part of the body; a general anaesthetic puts a person to sleep for a period of time.
analgesics	Medications that are used to relieve pain.
angiogenesis	The formation of new blood vessels to support tissue. Angiogenesis enables tumours to develop their own blood supply, which helps them to survive and grow.
anus	The entrance to the back passage, through which bowel motions are passed.
ascites	A fluid build-up in the abdomen, making it swollen and bloated.
atypia	Slight changes in the cells of the cervix.

B

barium enema	A test to look for cancer in the bowel. A white chalky liquid is put into your rectum and x-rays are taken.
baseline	At the beginning of the trial, before treatment is started.
Batholin's glands	Small glands on each side of the vagina.
benign	Not cancerous. Benign cells are not able to spread like cancer cells.
beta human chorionic gonadotrophin (beta-HCG)	A hormone normally found in the blood and urine during pregnancy. It may also be produced by some tumour cells. An increased level of beta-human chorionic gonadotropin may be a sign of cancer of the uterus, ovary, liver, stomach, pancreas or lung, or gestational trophoblastic disease. Beta-human chorionic gonadotropin may also be produced in response to certain conditions that are not cancer. Also called β -hCG.
bilateral salpingo oophorectomy	Surgical removal of both ovaries and both Fallopian tubes.
biopsy	The removal of a small amount of tissue from the body, for examination under a microscope, to help diagnose a disease.
bladder	A sac with an elastic wall of muscle; found in the lower part of the abdomen. The bladder stores urine until it is passed from the body.
bloating	Full, uncomfortable feeling in abdomen. Can be caused by gas, eating in excess or constipation.
blood count	A test that counts the number of red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets in your blood.
body image	How you feel about your body, how you think it looks and how you present it to others.
brachytherapy	A type of radiotherapy treatment that implants radioactive material sealed in needles or seeds into or near the tumour.
breakthrough pain	A brief and often severe pain that occurs even though a person may be taking pain medication regularly.

C

CA125	A protein found in the blood. This protein is often higher than normal in women with ovarian cancer. High levels may also occur in women with common gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis or fibroids.
cancer	A disease of the body's cells that starts in the genes. Damaged genes cause cells to behave abnormally, and they may grow into a lump called a tumour.
cancer survivor	On this website, this term is used to mean anyone who has finished their active cancer treatment.
cannula	A plastic tube inserted into a narrow opening so that fluids can be introduced or removed.
carcinogens	These are substances or agents that are known to cause cancer, for example tobacco, asbestos and ultraviolet radiation.
carcinoma	A cancer that starts in the tissue that lines the skin and internal organs of the body.
carcinoma in situ	Cancer that involves only the cells in which it began and has not spread to nearby tissues.

carcinogen	A substance known to cause and/or promote cancer. Carcinogens can be created by humans, such as cigarette smoke, or simply be present naturally in the environment, as is ultraviolet radiation from the sun, both of which are known to play a major role in the development of cancer. X-rays and viruses are also known carcinogens.
carer	A person who helps someone through an illness or disability such as cancer.
catheter	A hollow, flexible tube through which fluids can be passed into the body or drained from it.
cells	The building blocks of the body. A human is made of millions of cells, which are adapted for different functions. Cells can reproduce themselves exactly, unless they are abnormal or damaged, as are cancer cells.
central line	A plastic tube inserted into a vein in your chest.
cervical smear	See Pap smear
cervix	The end of the uterus that forms a canal and extends into the vagina.
chemotherapy	The use of drugs, which kill or slow cell growth, to treat cancer. These are called cytotoxic drugs.
chromosome	A thread like structure found in the nucleus of all body cells (except red blood cells) made up of strings of proteins called genes.
chronic pain	Pain that can range from mild to severe and lasts a long time.
CIN	Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia. This means abnormal changes or growth in the surface layers of the cervix. These changes are not cancer but warn that cancer may develop in the future. CIN is graded 1, 2, 3. CIN 3 means the most severe changes.
clear margin	When a malignant tumour is surgically removed some surrounding tissue will be removed with it. If this surrounding tissue does not contain any cancer cells it is said to be a clear margin.
climax	The peak of sexual response. Also know as orgasm.
clinical trial	A research study that tests new and better ways of improving health in people.
clitoris	The main sexual pleasure organ for women. It is made up of erectile tissue with rich sensory nerve endings. The clitoris becomes erect during arousal.
colectomy	An operation to remove the colon or part of the colon.
colostomy	An operation where the colon is attached to an opening on the stomach.
colposcopy	The examination of the cervix with a magnifying instrument called a colposcope, to check for abnormalities.
complementary therapy	Therapy used together with standard medical treatment. Examples include counselling, relaxation therapy, massage, acupuncture, yoga and meditation, aromatherapy, and art and music therapy.
CT (computerised tomography) scan	The technique for constructing pictures from cross-sections of the body, by x-raying the part of the body to be examined from many different angles.
cone biopsy	The removal of a cone-shaped piece of the cervix. It may be used to both diagnose and treat cervical cancer.
constipation	Difficulty passing a bowel motion regularly or often.
controlled release morphine	An opioid medication (one of the strongest pain relievers) that lasts for eight to 12 hours.
control	The existing treatment that is being compared with the new treatment. The control is generally the best standard treatment available.

controlled trial	A controlled trial compares two or more treatments to discover what is best.
cryotherapy	Destruction of tissue by applying extreme cold.
CT scan	See computerised tomography scan.
curette	Removal of growths with a curette: a spoon-shaped instrument with a sharp edge.
cyst	A sac or capsule in the body. It may be filled with fluid or other material.
cystoscope	A thin, lighted-viewing instrument that is inserted into the urethra and advanced into the bladder.
cystoscopy	A test that allows the doctor to look at the interior lining of the bladder and the urethra.
cytology	The study of cells.

D

diagnosis	The identification and naming of a person's disease.
diarrhoea	Opening the bowels very frequently. Motions may be watery.
diethylstilboestrol (DES)	A hormone drug prescribed to pregnant women between 1940 and 1970 to try to prevent miscarriages.
dietitian	A health professional who specialises in human nutrition.
dose	The amount of medication taken.
dose titration	Adjustment of medication dose either up or down.
dysplasia	A change in size, shape and arrangement of normal cells. Dysplastic cells are abnormal but are not cancerous. They may develop into cancer. Dysplasia is either low grade or high grade.

E

eligibility criteria	Characteristics of the people for whom the trial is suitable.
endocervical cells	The cells lining the inside of the cervix.
endometrial	To do with the inner lining of the uterus or womb (the endometrium).
endometrial hyperplasia	An abnormal increase in the number of cells in the endometrium.
endometrial sampling	Taking a biopsy or sample of the lining of the uterus to test for cancer or other conditions.
endometrium	Glandular lining of the inside of the uterus that is stimulated by the hormones oestrogen and progesterone and shed each month during menstruation.
enduring power of attorney	A person who acts on behalf of the person they are caring for on all financial matters.
epidural	An injection into the spinal column, outside the lining of the spinal cord.
epithelial abnormality	Changes in the cells of the cervix. These changes may be low grade or high grade.
epithelium	The cells that make up the internal and external surfaces of the body, for example, skin, inside of lungs, ovaries.
experimental treatment	A new treatment being tested in a trial.
external beam radiotherapy	Uses x-rays directed from an external machine.
external genitalia	Known collectively as the vulva. Includes the clitoris, labia minora, labia majora and mons pubis.
external radiotherapy	Radiotherapy administered by a machine, which targets radiation at the cancer.

F

faeces	Bowel motions or stools.
fallopian tubes	The two long, finger-like tubes that extend from the uterus to the ovaries. The Fallopian tubes carry fertilised eggs from the ovary to the uterus.
familial	Indicates that a condition that can be inherited from through the generations of a family through one or more genes.
fertility	Ability to have children.

G

general anaesthetic	A general anaesthetic makes you lose consciousness and fall asleep. You can't feel anything at all.
gene	The elements of a cell that carry instructions on how the cell should grow and function. Each person has a set of many thousands of genes inherited from both parents. This set is found in every cell of the body.
general practitioner	General practitioners diagnose, refer and treat the health problems of individuals and families in the community. Also commonly referred to as family doctors.
genitals	The sexual organs.
genital wart	A raised growth on the surface of the genitals caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. The HPV in genital warts is very contagious and can be spread by skin-to-skin contact, usually during oral, anal, or genital sex with an infected partner. Also called condyloma.
germ cells	Cells that produce eggs in females and sperm in males. Germ cell cancers can occur in the ovaries or testicles.
GP	See general practitioner.
grade	A score that describes how quickly the tumour is likely to grow.
gynaecologic oncologist	A doctor who specialises in treating diseases of the female reproductive system.
gynaecologist	A doctor who specialises in treating diseases of the female reproductive system.

H

hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC)	A condition in some families where the tendency to develop bowel cancer (and to a lesser extent other cancers, including endometrial cancer and ovarian cancer) is inherited. Up to 5% of all bowel cancer is due to HNPCC. About 80% of people who have the gene for HNPCC will develop a bowel cancer sometime in their life. Also called Lynch syndrome.
HNPCC family	A group of relatives in which it is known, or strongly suspected, that an HNPCC gene mutation is present, based on their extensive family history of bowel cancer, and to a lesser extent other cancers, including endometrial cancer and ovarian cancer.
hormone	A substance that affects how your body works. Some hormones control growth, others control reproduction. They are distributed around the body through the bloodstream.
hormone replacement therapy (HRT)	Drug therapy that supplies the body with hormones that it is no longer able to produce; it is used to relieve menopausal symptoms.

hormone therapy, hormone treatment	A treatment that blocks the body's natural hormones, which help cancer grow.
Human papillomavirus	Also called HPV or wart virus. A group of viruses that can cause infection in the skin surface of different areas of the body including the genital area.
hysterectomy	The surgical removal of the uterus.
hysteroscopy	A procedure to look inside the uterus by stretching and opening the cervix and inserting a telescope-like device called a hysteroscope.

I

ileostomy	Similar to a colostomy, but the operation brings part of the small bowel to an opening in the abdomen.
ileum	The lower half of the small bowel, which joins up with the colon.
incontinence	Inability to hold or control the loss of urine or faeces.
informed consent form	The form a person signs to show that they understand the information they have been given about a trial and they agree to take part.
internal radiotherapy	A form of radiotherapy, where sources of radiation are implanted in hollow tubes at or near the cancer.
intravenous	Into a vein. An intravenous drip gives drugs directly into a vein.
invasive cervical cancer	Cancer that has spread from the surface of the cervix to tissue deeper in the cervix or to other parts of the body.

L

labia majora	The outer lips of the vagina.
labia minora	The inner lips of the vagina. These join at the top to cover the clitoris with a fatty hood.
laparotomy	Operation in which a long cut is made in the abdomen to examine the internal organs; also sometimes called an exploratory operation.
laxative	Something to stop constipation.
libido	Sex drive.
local anaesthetic	A medication that blocks the feeling of pain in a specific location in the body.
lymph	A clear fluid that circulates around the body through the lymphatic system, carrying cells that fight infection.
lymph nodes	Also called lymph glands. Small, bean-shaped collections of lymph cells scattered across the lymphatic system. They get rid of bacteria and other harmful things. There are lymph nodes in the neck, armpit, groin and abdomen.
lymph vessels	A network of thin tubes that spread into tissues all over the body.
lymphadenectomy	Removal of the lymph glands from a part of the body.

lymphatic system	A network of vessels that carry a clear fluid called lymph from the body's tissues to the bloodstream. The lymphatic system is part of the body's immune system and helps the body fight infection.
lymphoedema	Swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. This happens when lymph nodes do not drain properly, usually after lymph glands are removed.
Lynch syndrome	An alternative term for hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC).

M

magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)	Similar to a CT scan, but this test uses magnetism instead of x-rays to build up cross-sectional pictures of the body.
malignant	Cancerous. Malignant cells can spread and can eventually cause death if they cannot be treated.
medical oncologist	A clinician specialising in the treatment of cancer using chemotherapy and other drug therapies.
menopause	The time when women stop having periods, usually between the ages of 45 and 55.
menstruation	A woman's monthly bleed from the vagina, also called 'periods'.
metastasis	Also known as a secondary cancer. A cancer that has spread from another part of the body.
microinvasive cervical cancer	Cancer cells that have just broken through the bottom layer of the surface of the cervix.
mons pubis	The area of fatty tissue covered with pubic hair.
MRI	See magnetic resonance imaging.
multidisciplinary team	<p>A health care team consisting of a group of experts, including doctors, nurses and other health professionals who specialise in the treatment of specific types of cancer. Most doctors who treat the common types of cancer work with experts in a multidisciplinary team.</p> <p>A multidisciplinary team can include a general practitioner, a surgeon, a medical oncologist, a radiation oncologist, a palliative care specialist, a nurse consultant, nurses, a dietician, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, a social worker, a psychologist, a counsellor and a pastoral care worker.</p>

N

neoadjuvant therapy or neoadjuvant treatment	Treatment given before the main treatment to increase the chances of a cure.
nerve block	Pain medication that is injected directly into or around a nerve or into the spine to block pain.
nausea	Feeling sick or wanting to be sick.
neoplasia	Any new or abnormal growth of tissues, in which the growth is uncontrolled and progressive.
nodule	Swelling or lump that may be cancerous or noncancerous.
nutrition	The process of eating and digesting the necessary food the body needs.
nutritious/nourishing	Food that is a good source of energy (calories) and/or protein as well as vitamins and minerals.

O

oedema	Abnormally large amounts of fluid in the tissues.
oestrogen	The main female sex hormone produced mostly by the ovaries. Oestrogen regulates the menstrual cycle and prepares the breasts for milk production.
omentum	A protective apron of fatty tissue over the abdominal organs.
oncologist	A doctor who specialises in the study and treatment of cancer.
oophorectomy	The removal of one or both ovaries.
opioids	The strongest pain relievers available. Include morphine, fentanyl, codeine, oxycodone, hydromorphone and methadone.
orgasm	Sexual climax.
osteoporosis	A decrease in bone mass, causing bones to become fragile. This makes them brittle and liable to break.
ovary	The main female reproductive organ. They are two small almond-shaped glands found on either side of the uterus, close to the end of the Fallopian tubes. The ovaries contain and release an egg about once a month in fertile women. They also produce the sex hormones, oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone.
ovulation	The release of an egg during the menstrual cycle.
ovum	The female egg produced by the ovary.

P

palliative care / palliative treatment	Treatment to relieve symptoms without trying to cure the disease.
Pap smear	Also called Pap test. A test that can detect changes in cervical cells. Some cells are scraped off the cervix and sent to a laboratory for examination under a microscope.
paracentesis	The drainage of excess fluid from the abdomen.
partial vulvectomy	The surgical removal of part of the vulva.
pathologist	A person who studies diseases to understand their nature and cause. Pathologists examine biopsies under a microscope to diagnose cancer and other diseases.
pelvic exenteration	The surgical removal of the affected organs.
pelvis/pelvic	The lower part of the trunk of the body: roughly, the area that extends from hip to hip and waist to groin.
perineum	The area of skin between the vulva and the anus.
peritoneum	The lining of the abdomen.
PET scan	Positron emission tomography. A technique used to build up clear and detailed cross-section pictures of the body. The person is injected with a glucose solution containing a small amount of radioactive material. The PET scanner can 'see' the radioactive substance. Damaged or cancerous cells show up as areas where the glucose solution is being used.
placebo	A dummy pill or injection, which looks like the new treatment being tested but contains no active ingredient.

polyp	An abnormal growth that protrudes from a mucous membrane, often on a stalk.
Positron emission tomography	See PET scan
precancerous	A term used to describe a condition that may or is likely to become a cancer.
premature menopause	Menopause that occurs before the age of 40.
primary cancer	The original cancer. Cells from the primary cancer may break away and be carried to other parts of the body, where secondary cancers form.
primary vaginal cancer	A type of vaginal cancer that starts in the vagina.
primary site	The initial location of a cancer in the body when it is first diagnosed.
progesterone	Hormone made by the ovaries that prepares the lining of the uterus (endometrium) for pregnancy.
prognosis	The likely outcome of a person's disease.
psychiatrist	A medical doctor who specialises in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders.
psychologist	A health professional who can talk with patients and their families about emotional and personal matters, and can help them make decisions.

Q

quality of life	A measure of how cancer and its treatment affect a person's day-to-day functioning.
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R

radiation oncologist	A doctor who specialises in treating cancer with radiotherapy.
radiation therapist	A health professional (not a medical doctor) who administers radiotherapy.
radical hysterectomy	An operation that removes the uterus (womb), cervix, ovaries and fallopian tubes.
radical local excision	An operation that cuts out the cancer and a larger area of normal tissue all around the cancer.
radical vulvectomy	An operation that removes the entire vulva, including the clitoris, and usually the surrounding lymph nodes.
radiotherapy	The use of radiation, usually x-rays or gamma rays, to kill cancer cells or injure them so they cannot grow or multiply.
randomised controlled trial	A trial in which participants are randomly allocated to receive the new treatment or the standard treatment (the control).
rectum	The last part of the bowel, leading to the anus, through which stool passes.
recurrent cancer	A cancer that grows from the cells of a primary cancer that have evaded treatment.
relapse	The return of a disease after a period of improvement.
remission	Period of time when the symptoms of the cancer reduce or disappear. A partial remission is when there has been a significant improvement in the cancer. A complete remission is when there is no evidence of active disease. This does not necessarily mean that the cancer is cured.
resection	Surgical removal of a portion of any part of the body.
respite	A support service funded by the government for carers to take a break from caring.
risk	A measure of how likely a person is to develop a disease or a side effect.
risk factor	A substance or condition that increases an individual's chances of getting a particular type of cancer.

S

sarcoma	A malignant tumour (a cancer) that starts in connective tissue.
screening	An organised program (using tests, examinations or other procedures) to identify disease such as cancer, or changes which may later develop into disease such as cancer, before symptoms appear.
secondary cancer	Also called a metastasis. A tumour that has spread from the original site to another part of the body.
secondary vaginal cancer	A type of vaginal cancer that has spread into the vagina from another part of the body.
sentinel node	The first lymph node to receive lymph fluid from a tumour.
serous	Serous is a type of epithelial ovarian cancer. Epithelial ovarian cancer starts in the epithelium: the surface of the ovary. It is the most common type of ovarian cancer.
sex-cord stromal cells	Cells of the ovary that release the female hormones.
side effect	Unintended effects of a drug or treatment.
simulator	A machine that takes x-rays to help pinpoint where radiotherapy should be targeted.
skin graft	A piece of skin moved from one part of the body to another to cover a wound.
specialist	A doctor who specialises in a particular area of medicine. Cancer specialists are called oncologists.
speculum	An instrument shaped like a duck bill. It is used to hold open the walls of the vagina so the cervix can be examined.
sperm	The male sex cell. It is made in the testes.
squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)	A cancer that arises in squamous or skin-like cells.
stage	The extent of a cancer and whether the disease has spread from an original site to other parts of the body.
staging	Tests to find out how far a cancer has spread.
standard treatment	The best proven treatment, based on results of past research.
stoma	An artificial opening into the body created by surgery to act as an exit for body wastes.
stomal therapy nurse	A registered nurse who specialises in caring for people who have stomas.
supportive care	Improving the comfort and quality of life for people with cancer.
surgeon	A doctor who performs surgery to remove cancerous tissue.
surgery	Treatment that involves an operation. This may involve removal of tissue, change in the organisation of the anatomy or placement of prostheses.
surgical oncologist	A doctor who specialises in the surgical treatment of cancer.
survivorship	In cancer, survivorship focuses on the health and life of a person with cancer beyond the diagnosis and treatment phases. Survivorship includes issues related to follow-up care, late effects of treatment, second cancers, and quality of life. Family members, friends, and caregivers are also part of the survivorship experience.

T

tamoxifen	A drug that blocks the effects of oestrogen in cancer cells; a treatment for oestrogen-receptive and progesterone-receptive cancers.
therapy	Another word for treatment, and includes chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormone therapy and surgery.
tissue	A collection of cells that make up each piece (or organ) of the body.
tissue biopsy	Examination of tissue that has been removed from the body under a microscope so any abnormalities in the cells can be seen.
transformation zone	The area where the squamous cells and glandular cells meet.
transvaginal ultrasonography	An examination on which an ultrasound instrument is inserted into the vagina to give a clear picture of the inside of the uterus and the ovaries.
tumour	A new or abnormal growth of tissue on or in the body.
tumour markers	Chemicals produced by cancer cells and released into the blood. These may suggest the presence of a tumour in the body. Some tumours will not have any tumour markers.

U

ulcer	A small wound in the skin or lining of the mouth or stomach. May be sore and swollen.
ultrasound	The use of soundwaves to build up a picture of the internal parts of the body.
urethra	The tube that carries urine from the bladder out through the penis and to the outside of the body.
uterus	Also called the womb. It is a hollow muscular organ shaped like an upside-down pear and located between the bladder and the bowel. It holds and nourishes a fertilised egg and pushes out the baby during childbirth.

V

vagina	A muscular canal about eight to 10 centimetres long that extends from the entrance of the uterus to the outer sex organs.
vaginectomy	An operation that removes all of the vagina.
vaginismus	A spasm in the vagina that may prevent sexual intercourse.
verrucous carcinoma	A rare, very slow-growing type of vulval cancer, which looks like a large wart.
vulva	The outer sex organs. They include the mons pubis, labia majora, labia minora and the clitoris.
vulval intraepithelial neoplasia (VIN)	Abnormal changes or growth in the skin of the vulva which can develop into vulval cancer if left untreated.
vulval lichen planus	A non-cancerous condition affecting the skin in the vulval area.
vulval lichen sclerosus	A non-cancerous condition affecting the skin in the vulval area.
vulval melanoma	A type of vulval cancer that develops from the melanin, the pigment-producing cells that give skin its colour.
vulvectomy	Removal of some or all of the outer sex organs (the vulva).
vulvodynia	Pain in the vulval area.
vulvoscopy	An examination of your vulva using a small microphone with a bright light called a colposcope.

W

wart virus	See human papillomavirus
womb	See uterus

Sources

We thank the following organisations for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet:

Cancer Council New South Wales

www.cancercouncil.com.au

National Cancer Institute (USA)

www.cancer.gov

Cancer Council Victoria

www.cancervic.org.au

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CANCER AUSTRALIA

ABN 21075951918

The National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers is an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for women affected by gynaecological cancers, their families and carers, and to lessen the impact of cancer on their lives. It has been established by Cancer Australia.

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