

What is brain cancer?

Brain cancer occurs when abnormal cells in the brain grow in an uncontrolled way.

The brain is part of the body's central nervous system.

What are the different types of brain cancer?

Brain tumours can be benign or malignant. They are named after the cells in which the cancer first develops.

An example of a benign brain tumour is a meningioma.¹

The most common malignant brain tumours are called gliomas. These include astrocytoma, glioblastoma multiforme (GBM) and oligodendroglioma.¹

What are the symptoms of brain cancer?

The symptoms of brain cancer depend on where the tumour is in the brain, the size of the tumour and how quickly it is growing.

Some common symptoms of brain cancer include:

- ▶ severe headaches, which may or may not be accompanied by nausea and vomiting¹
- ▶ weakness on one side of the body (hemiparesis)¹
- ▶ seizures¹
- ▶ changes in thinking or personality¹
- ▶ disturbed vision or speech¹
- ▶ difficulty controlling movement (ataxia)¹
- ▶ dizziness¹.

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms, not just brain cancer. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for brain cancer?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as brain cancer. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a person will develop brain cancer. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop brain cancer, while others with brain cancer may have had no known risk factors. Even if a person with brain cancer has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of their disease.

While the causes of brain cancer are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. These factors include:

- ▶ increasing age¹
- ▶ a family history of brain cancer.¹



How is brain cancer diagnosed?

A number of tests will be performed to investigate symptoms of brain cancer and confirm a diagnosis. Some of the more common tests include:

- ▶ a physical examination¹
- ▶ imaging tests such as a computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)¹
- ▶ taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) from the brain for examination under a microscope.¹

Treatment options

Treatment and care of people with cancer is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team.

Treatment for brain cancer depends on the stage of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the person's general health. Treatment may involve surgery to remove the affected area of the brain, and may also include radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy to destroy cancer cells.¹

Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some people may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating brain cancer.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups. The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au or Brain Tumour Alliance Australia www.btaa.org.au

CanTeen is a national support organisation for 12 - 24 year olds who are living with cancer www.canteen.org.au

References

1. Australian Cancer Network Adult Brain Tumour Guidelines Working Party. Clinical practice guidelines for the management of adult gliomas: astrocytomas and oligodendrogliomas. Cancer Council Australia, Australian Cancer Network and Clinical Oncological Society of Australia Inc., Sydney 2009.
2. Cancer Council Australia. Adult gliomas (astrocytomas and oligodendrogliomas): a guide for patients, their families and carers. Sydney: Cancer Council Australia/ Clinical Oncological Society of Australia, 2011.

