

Treating thyroid cancer

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Nearly 44,000 new cases of thyroid cancer will be diagnosed in the U.S. this year, and more than 2,000 people will die of the disease, according to the American Cancer Society.

Thyroid cancer occurs in the cells of the thyroid, a butterfly-shaped

gland at the base of your neck. Your thyroid produces hormones that regulate your [heart rate](#), [blood pressure](#), body temperature and weight.

There may be no signs or symptoms early in the disease. As thyroid cancer grows, it may cause swelling in your neck, voice changes, difficulty swallowing, and pain in your neck and throat.

Risk factors

Factors that may increase the risk of thyroid cancer include:

- Being female. Thyroid cancer occurs more often in women than men. Experts think it may be related to the hormone estrogen. People who are assigned female sex at birth generally have higher levels of estrogen in their bodies.
- Exposure to high levels of radiation. Radiation therapy treatments to the head and neck increase the risk of thyroid cancer.
- Certain inherited genetic syndromes. Genetic syndromes that increase the risk of thyroid cancer include familial medullary thyroid cancer, multiple endocrine neoplasia, Cowden syndrome and familial adenomatous polyposis. Types of thyroid cancer that sometimes run in families include medullary thyroid cancer and papillary thyroid cancer.

Treatment for thyroid cancer

Treatment can cure most thyroid cancers. Your treatment options will depend on the type and stage of your thyroid cancer, your overall health, and your preferences.

Treatment might not be needed right away for very small papillary

thyroid cancers because these cancers have a low risk of growing or spreading. Your health care team might recommend active surveillance with frequent monitoring of the cancer, including blood tests and an ultrasound exam of your neck once or twice a year. In some people, the cancer might never grow and never require treatment. In others, growth may eventually be detected, and treatment can begin.

If you've been diagnosed with thyroid cancer for which treatment is recommended, your options might include:

- **Surgery.** Most people with thyroid cancer that requires treatment will undergo surgery to remove part or all of the thyroid. Which operation your health care team might recommend depends on your type of thyroid cancer, the size of the cancer, whether the cancer has spread beyond the thyroid to the lymph nodes and your preferences. Options include removing all or most of the thyroid, removing just a portion of the thyroid, and removing lymph nodes in the neck.
- **Thyroid hormone replacement.** Thyroid hormone therapy is a treatment to replace or supplement the hormones produced in the thyroid. Thyroid hormone therapy medication usually is taken in pill form. It can be used to replace thyroid hormones after surgery and to suppress the growth of thyroid cancer cells.
- **Radioactive iodine.** Radioactive iodine treatment uses a form of iodine that's radioactive to kill thyroid cells and thyroid cancer cells that might remain after surgery. It's most often used to treat differentiated thyroid cancers that have a risk of spreading to other parts of the body.
- **Alcohol ablation.** Alcohol ablation, also called ethanol ablation, involves using a needle to inject alcohol into small areas of thyroid cancer. Ultrasound imaging is used to precisely guide the needle. The alcohol causes the thyroid cancer cells to shrink. Alcohol ablation may be an option to treat small areas of [thyroid](#)

[cancer](#), such as cancer that's found in a lymph node after surgery. Sometimes it's an option if you aren't healthy enough for surgery.

- Additional treatments for advanced thyroid cancers. Aggressive thyroid cancers that grow more quickly may require additional [treatment options](#) to control the disease. Options include targeted [drug therapy](#), [radiation therapy](#), chemotherapy, [radiofrequency ablation](#) and cryoablation.
- Palliative care. Palliative care is specialized [medical care](#) that focuses on providing relief from pain and other symptoms of a serious illness, with the aim to improve quality of life for patients and their families. Palliative care specialists work with you, your family and your health care team to provide an extra layer of support that complements your ongoing care.

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