

Why is cancer called cancer? We need to go back to Greco-Roman times for the answer

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Why does the word "cancer" have its roots in the ancient Greek and Latin words for crab? The physician Galen offers one explanation. Credit: [Pierre Roche Vigneron/Wikimedia](#)

One of the earliest descriptions of someone with cancer comes from the fourth century BC. Satyrus, tyrant of the city of Heracleia on the Black

Sea, developed a [cancer](#) between his groin and scrotum. As the cancer spread, Satyrus had ever greater pains. He was unable to sleep and had convulsions.

Advanced cancers in that part of the body were regarded as inoperable, and there were no drugs strong enough to alleviate the agony. So doctors could do nothing. Eventually, the cancer took Satyrus' life at the age of 65.

Cancer was already well known in this period. A text written in the late fifth or early fourth century BC, called [Diseases of Women](#), described how [breast cancer](#) develops:

"Hard growths form [...] out of them hidden cancers develop [...] pains shoot up from the patients' breasts to their throats, and around their shoulder blades [...] such patients become thin through their whole body [...] breathing decreases, the sense of smell is lost [...]"

[Other medical works](#) of this period describe different sorts of cancers. A woman from the Greek city of Abdera died from a cancer of the chest; a man with [throat cancer](#) survived after his doctor burned away the tumor.

Where does the word 'cancer' come from?

The word cancer comes from the same era. In the late fifth and early fourth century BC, doctors were using the word karkinos—the ancient Greek [word](#) for crab—to describe malignant tumors. Later, when Latin-speaking doctors described the same disease, they used the Latin word for crab: [cancer](#). So, the name stuck.

Even in [ancient times](#), people wondered why doctors named the disease

after an animal. One explanation was the crab is an aggressive animal, just as cancer can be [an aggressive disease](#); another explanation was the crab can grip one part of a person's body with its claws and be difficult to remove, just as cancer can be difficult to remove [once it has developed](#). Others thought it was because of the appearance of the tumor.

The physician Galen (129–216 AD) described breast cancer in his work [A Method of Medicine to Glaucon](#), and compared the form of the tumor to the form of a crab:

"We have often seen in the breasts a tumor exactly like a crab. Just as that animal has feet on either side of its body, so too in this disease the veins of the unnatural swelling are stretched out on either side, creating a form similar to a crab."

Not everyone agreed what caused cancer

In the Greco-Roman period, there were different opinions about the cause of cancer.

According to a widespread ancient medical theory, the body has four humors: blood, yellow bile, phlegm and black bile. These four humors need to be kept in a state of balance, otherwise [a person becomes sick](#). If a person suffered from an excess of black bile, it was thought this would eventually lead to cancer.

The physician Erasistratus, who lived from around 315 to 240 BC, disagreed. However, so far as we know, he did not offer an alternative explanation.

How was cancer treated?

Cancer was treated in a range of [different ways](#). It was thought that cancers in their early stages could be cured using medications.

These included drugs derived from plants (such as cucumber, narcissus bulb, castor bean, bitter vetch, cabbage); animals (such as the ash of a crab); and metals (such as arsenic).

Galen [claimed](#) that by using this sort of medication, and repeatedly purging his patients with emetics or enemas, he was sometimes successful at making emerging cancers disappear. He said the same treatment sometimes prevented more advanced cancers from continuing to grow. However, he also said surgery is necessary if these medications do not work.

Surgery was usually avoided as patients tended to die from blood loss. The most successful operations were on cancers of the tip of the breast. Leonidas, a physician who lived in the second and third century AD, [described](#) his method, which involved cauterizing (burning):

"I usually operate in cases where the tumors do not extend into the chest [...] When the patient has been placed on her back, I incise the healthy area of the breast above the tumor and then cauterize the incision until scabs form and the bleeding is stanchd. Then I incise again, marking out the area as I cut deeply into the breast, and again I cauterize. I do this [incising and cauterizing] quite often [...] This way the bleeding is not dangerous. After the excision is complete I again cauterize the entire area until it is desiccated."

Cancer was generally regarded as an incurable disease, and so it was feared. Some people with cancer, such as the poet Silius Italicus (26–102 AD), [died by suicide](#) to end the torment.

Patients would also pray to the gods for hope of a cure. An example of

this is Innocentia, an aristocratic lady who lived in Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia) in the fifth century AD. She told her doctor divine intervention had cured her breast cancer, though her doctor [did not believe her](#).

From the past into the future

We began with Satyrus, a tyrant in the fourth century BC. In the 2,400 years or so since then, much has changed in our knowledge of what causes cancer, how to prevent it and how to treat it. We also know there are more than [200 different types](#) of cancer. Some people's cancers are so successfully managed, they go on to live long lives.

But there is still no general "cure for cancer," a disease that about [one in five](#) people develop in their lifetime. [In 2022 alone](#), there were about 20 million new cancer cases and 9.7 million cancer deaths globally. We clearly have a long way to go.

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