

Education

Brain Tumors

What is cancer of the brain?

A brain tumor is an abnormal growth in or around your brain. Cancer of the brain is a malignant growth, meaning that the tumor contains cancer cells. Benign brain tumors do not contain cancer cells.

Cancers that start in the brain are called primary brain cancers. Cancer that spreads to the brain from another part of the body is called secondary brain cancer or metastatic brain cancer. This type of cancer is much more common than primary brain tumors. Metastatic brain cancer most often spreads from the lung, breast, kidney, or skin.

Brain tumors are always serious because as they grow they press on and destroy healthy brain tissue.

How does it occur?

The cause of primary brain cancer is not known.

What are the symptoms?

Tumors increase pressure within the skull causing:

- headache (most often during the night)
- nausea and vomiting
- vision problems such as double vision
- trouble thinking and speaking clearly
- drowsiness.

Depending on where the tumor is in the brain, it also may cause:

- weakness on one side of the body
- dizziness or loss of balance
- mood swings
- seizures.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine you and ask about your symptoms. You may have a neurological exam, which involves checking eye movements, reflexes, hearing, balance, coordination, touch, taste, smell, facial muscle movement, tongue movement, head movement, and mental status.

You may need special tests to show the size, shape, and location of the tumor within your brain. Tests may include:

- x-rays
- CT scan (computed tomography)
- PET (positron emission tomography) scan
- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

A biopsy may be done to confirm that the tumor is cancer and to find out what type of cells are involved. To do a biopsy, a surgeon will remove a small sample of tumor tissue from your brain. The tissue will then be examined under a microscope.

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on your diagnosis. Surgery is the most common treatment of primary adult brain tumors. To take out the cancer from the brain, a doctor will cut a part of the bone from the skull to get to the brain. This procedure is called a craniotomy. After the doctor removes the cancer, the bone will be put back or a piece of metal or a special fabric will be used to cover the opening in the skull.

Radiation therapy uses x-rays to kill cancer cells from the outside and shrink tumors (external-beam radiation therapy). Radiation therapy may also be used by putting radioisotopes through thin plastic tubes into the tumor to kill cancer cells from the inside (internal radiation therapy).

Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells. Chemotherapy may be taken by pill, or it may be put into the body by a needle in the vein or muscle. Hormone therapy uses hormones to stop the cancer cells from growing. Biologic therapy uses drugs to improve the way your body's immune system fights disease.

Other treatments may include radiofrequency, ultrasound, and electromagnetic heat therapy.

How can I take care of myself?

- Tell your health care provider about headaches, vision problems, or any other symptoms that have started recently or are getting worse.
- Discuss your cancer treatment options with your provider so you understand them.
- Tell your provider if your treatment causes discomfort. Relief may be available.
- If possible, join a support group for cancer patients to help you during your illness.
- Maintain a hopeful and positive outlook throughout your treatment and recovery.

For more information, contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society or call 800-ACS-2345, or the National Cancer Institute at 800-4-CANCER. You may also visit their Web sites at <http://www.cancer.org> or <http://www.cancer.gov>.

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