



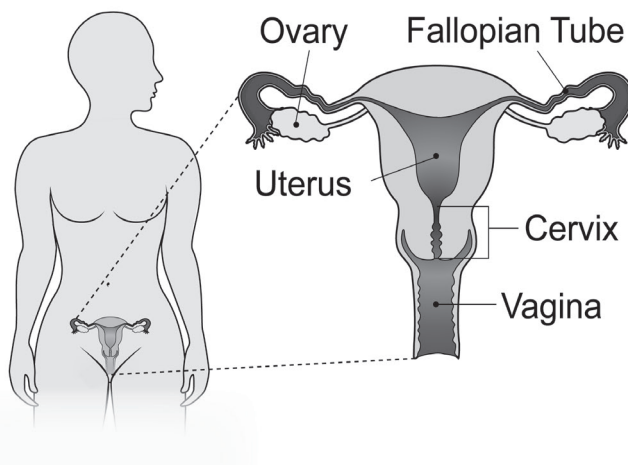
# Vaginal cancer: Know what to expect

## For women with vaginal cancer

### What is the vagina?

The vagina is a hollow canal that connects the cervix and the uterus to the outside of the body. When a woman gives birth, the baby exits her body through the cervix and the vagina (called the birth canal).

### Female Anatomy



### What is vaginal cancer?

Vaginal cancer is a disease in which normal cells in the vagina begin to change, grow out of control, and form a mass of cells called a tumour. At first, the changes in a cell are precancerous (abnormal cells). If the precancerous cells change into cancer cells and spread deeper into the vagina or to other tissues and organs, the disease is then called vaginal cancer.

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The 2 main types of vaginal cancer are:

- **squamous cell carcinoma** – starts in the thin, flat cells that line the vagina
- **adenocarcinoma** – starts in the cells that make mucus and other fluids in the vagina

## **What does stage mean?**

The stage is a way of describing a cancer. Stage can describe:

- where the cancer is located
- if or where it has spread
- if it is affecting other organs in the body

There are 4 stages of vaginal cancer (Stage 1 to Stage 4B). Your doctor will use the stage of your cancer to decide which treatment is best for you.

**Stage 1:** Cancer is found in the vaginal wall only

**Stage 2:** Cancer has spread through the wall of the vagina to the tissue around the vagina

**Stage 3:** Cancer has spread to the wall of the pelvis

**Stage 4A:** Cancer may have spread to one or more of the following areas:

- The lining of the bladder
- The lining of the rectum
- Beyond the area of the pelvis that has the bladder, uterus, ovaries and cervix

**Stage 4B:** Cancer has spread to parts of the body that are not near the vagina, such as the lung or bone

## **Has your cancer spread?**

The process used to find out if cancer has spread within the vagina or to other parts of the body is called staging.

The information gathered from the staging process determines the stage of the disease. It is important to know the stage in order to plan treatment.

The following procedures may be used in the staging process:

### **Chest x-ray:**

- An x-ray of the organs and bones inside the chest. An x-ray is a type of energy beam that can go through the body and onto film, making a picture of areas inside the body.

### **Colposcopy**

- A procedure in which a colposcope (a lighted, magnifying instrument) is used to check the vagina and cervix for abnormal areas. Tissue samples may be taken using a curette (spoon-shaped instrument) or a brush and checked under a microscope for signs of disease.

### **CT scan (CAT scan)**

- A procedure that makes a series of detailed pictures of areas inside the body, taken from different angles. The pictures are made by a computer linked to an x-ray machine. A dye may be injected into a vein or swallowed to help the organs or tissues show up more clearly. This procedure is also called computed tomography, computerized tomography, or computerized axial tomography.

### **MRI (magnetic resonance imaging)**

- A procedure that uses a magnet, radio waves, and a computer to make a series of detailed pictures of areas inside the body. This procedure is also called nuclear magnetic resonance imaging (NMRI).

## **Pelvic exam**

- An exam of the vagina, cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, and rectum. A speculum is inserted into the vagina and the doctor or nurse looks at the vagina and cervix for signs of disease. A Pap test of the cervix is usually done. The doctor or nurse also inserts one or two lubricated, gloved fingers of one hand into the vagina and places the other hand over the lower abdomen to feel the size, shape, and position of the uterus and ovaries. The doctor or nurse also inserts a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum to feel for lumps or abnormal areas.

## **PET scan (positron emission tomography scan)**

- A procedure to find malignant tumor cells in the body. A small amount of radioactive glucose (sugar) is injected into a vein. The PET scanner rotates around the body and makes a picture of where glucose is being used in the body. Malignant tumor cells show up brighter in the picture because they are more active and take up more glucose than normal cells do.

## **Biopsy**

- A biopsy may be done to find out if cancer has spread, and to determine the type of cancer

## **How does cancer spread in the body?**

Cancer can spread through tissue, the lymph system, and the blood:

- **Tissue.** The cancer spreads from where it began by growing into nearby areas.
- **Lymphatic system.** The cancer spreads from where it began by getting into the lymphatic system. The cancer travels through the lymphatic vessels to other parts of the body.
- **Blood.** The cancer spreads from where it began by getting into the blood. The cancer travels through the blood vessels to other parts of the body.

When cancer spreads to another part of the body, it is called metastasis. Cancer cells break away from where they began (the primary tumor) and travel through the lymph system or blood.

## **Factors affecting prognosis**

The prognosis (chance of recovery) depends on the following:

- the stage of the cancer
- the size of the tumour
- whether there are signs or symptoms at diagnosis
- whether the cancer has just been diagnosed or has recurred (come back)
- the patient's age and general health

## **How is vaginal cancer treated?**

The treatment of vaginal cancer depends on:

- the size and stage of the tumour
- the type of vaginal cancer
- whether the cancer has spread or is close to other organs
- your overall health

If the abnormal cells have become cancerous, there are three standard treatments used which are, radiation therapy, surgery and chemotherapy.

Radiation therapy is the most common treatment. It uses high-energy x-rays or other types of radiation to kill cancer cells or keep them from growing. There are two types:

- External radiation therapy uses a machine outside the body to send radiation toward the cancer
- Internal radiation therapy uses a radioactive substance sealed in a needle, wire, or catheter that is placed directly into or near the cancer

The goal of surgery is to remove all the cancer without any loss of the woman's sexual function. A vaginectomy is a surgical procedure that removes all or part of the vagina.

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to stop the growth of cancer cells, either by killing the cells or by stopping them from dividing

- Systemic chemotherapy: when the chemotherapy is injected into a vein, the drugs enter the bloodstream and can affect cancer cells throughout the body.

Most side effects of vaginal cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with help from your health care team. When making treatment decisions, you may also consider a clinical trial.

Clinical trials can include patients who have not yet received treatment, and patients whose cancer has gotten better. There are also clinical trials that test new ways to stop cancer from coming back or reducing side effects.

Talk with your doctor about all treatment options.

## Coping with vaginal cancer

Dealing with the news of a cancer diagnosis can be very difficult. You are not alone. Your health care team is here for you so feel comfortable speaking with them about your concerns and needs. As a patient in the Princess Margaret Cancer Program, you have access to many resources to help you cope.

These include:

- social workers who can help you better cope with your illness
- clinical dietitians that specialize in cancer and can help you with your nutrition and diet concerns
- the [Cancer Rehabilitation and Survivorship Program](#) which has programs and services to help you cope with cancer and its treatment, including:
  - a [Patient & Family Library](#) where you can ask a Librarian to search for specific health information and borrow books, CDs and DVDs

For more information about the services available to you or to contact a social worker or dietitian, speak to a member of your health care team.

To contact the Princess Margaret Cancer Rehabilitation and Survivorship program visit:

- [Cancer Survivorship Centre](#) located on the 2nd floor of Princess Margaret Cancer Centre
- [Princess Margaret Patient & Family Library](#) located in the atrium on the main floor of Princess Margaret Cancer Centre
- [ELLICSR: the Health, Wellness and Cancer Survivorship Centre](#) located in the basement of the Clinical Services Building in the Toronto General Hospital

## Questions to Ask your Doctor

Speaking to your health care team is important in helping you make decisions about your health care. Sometimes preparing a list of questions you want to ask can be helpful.

### **Here is a list of common questions you may want to ask your doctor:**

1. What type of vaginal cancer do I have?
2. Can you explain my pathology report (test results) to me?
3. What stage is the vaginal cancer?
4. Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
5. Would you explain my treatment options?
6. How will this treatment benefit me?
7. What clinical trials are open to me?
8. How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
9. Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
10. How will my cancer affect my sex life?
11. What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan?
12. What are the possible long-term side effects of my cancer treatment?
13. How serious is my cancer?
14. What are my chances of survival?
15. Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
16. Whom do I call for questions or problems?
17. Is there anything else I should be asking?