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If You Have a Soft Tissue Sarcoma

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What is sarcoma?

This information is about sarcomas in adults. Sarcoma is a type of cancer that starts in certain parts of the body, like bone or muscle. These cancers start in soft tissues like fat, muscle, nerves, fibrous tissues, blood vessels, or deep skin tissues. They can be found anywhere in the body, but most of them start in the arms or legs.

Sarcoma starts when certain cells, like muscle cells, grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Sarcoma cells can spread to other parts of the body. Sarcoma cells in an arm muscle can sometimes travel to the lung and grow there. When cancer cells do this, it's called metastasis. To doctors, the cancer cells in the new place look just like the ones from the arm muscle.

Cancer is always named for the place where it starts. So when soft tissue sarcoma spreads to the lung (or any other place), it's still called sarcoma. It's not called lung cancer. What is sarcoma?

There are more than 50 kinds of soft tissue sarcomas. They can start in different types of cells, grow at different rates, and have different outlooks.

Your doctor can tell you more about the type you have.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Why do you think I have cancer?
- Is there a chance I don't have cancer?
- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- Where is the cancer?
- What will happen next?

How does the doctor know I have sarcoma?

Most sarcomas start as a lump in the arm or leg. A lump that keeps growing is the most common symptom. Sometimes the lump hurts. When sarcomas start in the belly, they can cause belly pain or changes in the way you eat or go to the bathroom. If a lump doesn't go away or gets worse with time, you should go to a doctor to get it checked out. Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and do a physical exam.

If signs are pointing to a soft tissue sarcoma, more tests will be done. Here are some of the tests you may need:

Tests that may be done

X-rays: X-rays of the part of your body with the lump are often the first tests done. If cancer is found, a chest x-ray may be done to see if it has spread to your lungs.

Ultrasound: This test uses sound waves to make pictures of the inside of the body. It can help show if the lump is solid or filled with fluid. (Cancers tend to be solid.)

CT or CAT scan: This is a type of x-ray that takes clear, detailed pictures of your insides and the tumor or lump. This test may also be done to see if cancer has spread.

MRI scan: MRIs use radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to take detailed pictures. MRIs make it easier to see the size and shape of the tumor. This helps the doctor plan for a biopsy (see below).

Biopsy

A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if you have cancer. In a biopsy, the doctor takes out a small piece of the lump to check it for cancer cells. Tests will also be done to find out what type of sarcoma it is.

There are different [ways to do a biopsy](#)¹. The type used will depend on the size of the lump and where it is in your body. Ask your doctor what kind you will need.

The cancer cells in the biopsy sample will be given a **grade**: 1, 2, or 3.. This helps doctors predict how fast the cancer is likely to grow and spread. The grade is based on how much the cancer cells look like normal cells. Cells that look very different from normal cells tend to grow faster and are given a higher grade.. Ask the doctor to explain the grade of your cancer. The grade helps the doctor decide which treatment is best for you.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- Who can explain them to me?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

How serious is my cancer?

If you have sarcoma, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called staging. Your doctor will want to find out the stage of your cancer to help decide what type of treatment is best for you.

The stage is based on how much the cancer has grown in the place where it started or spread to other parts of your body. The grade of the sarcoma (see above) is also part of the stage.

Your cancer can be stage 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means a more serious cancer that has spread from where it first started. Ask the doctor about the cancer stage and what it means for

you.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage of the cancer?
- Would you explain to me what the stage means in my case?
- Based on the stage of the cancer, how long do you think I'll live?
- What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

Sarcoma is often treated with surgery . Radiation and chemotherapy may also be used.

The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- The type of sarcoma
- The stage and grade of the cancer
- Where the tumor is
- The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
- Your age
- Your overall health
- Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that come with it

Surgery

Surgery is used to take out the tumor and a margin or edge of the healthy tissue around it. The type of surgery done depends on where the tumor is. Ask your doctor what kind of surgery you will have and what to expect.

Side effects of surgery

Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Ask the doctor what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat soft tissue sarcomas should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

Radiation treatments

Radiation uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. It may be used to help shrink a tumor so it's easier to take out with surgery. It may also be used after surgery to kill any cancer that may have been left behind. Radiation can also help treat symptoms like pain and swelling if the sarcoma has spread.

A machine can aim radiation at the tumor. This is called external beam radiation.

Radiation can also be given by putting small pellets (seeds) of radiation in or near the tumor. This is called brachytherapy.

Sometimes, both types of radiation are used.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, talk about what side effects might happen. seeds) sion cation treatm45

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Will I need to see other doctors?
- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
- What will the surgery be like?
- How will my body look and work after surgery?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- What will these treatments be like?
- What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?

at your life in new ways. You might be thinking about how to improve your health. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or talk to your doctor to find out what you can do to feel better.

You can't change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making healthy choices and feeling as good as you can.

[For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey](#)

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/biopsy-and-cytology-tests/biopsy-types.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html
3. www.cancer.org

Words to know

Biopsy (BY-op-see): Taking out a small piece of tissue to see if there are cancer cells in it.

Leiomyosarcoma (LIE-o-MY-o-sar-KO-muh): Sarcoma that starts in smooth muscle cells. Smooth muscles are those we cannot control, like in the blood vessels and the gut (intestines). This cancer can start anywhere in the body, but is most common in the uterus and belly.

Liposarcoma (LIE-po-sar-KO-muh): A type of sarcoma that starts in fat cells. It can start anywhere, but most often is found in the thigh, behind the knee, or inside the belly.

Metastasis (muh-TAS-tuh-sis): Cancer cells that have spread from where they started to other places in the body.

Orthopedic surgeon (or-thuh-PEE-dik): A surgeon who specializes in diseases and injuries of the muscles, joints, and bones.

Sarcoma (sar-KO-muh): Cancer that starts in connective tissue, such as cartilage, fat, muscle, and bone. **Connective tissues** connect and support other body tissues and organs.

Undifferentiated pleomorphic sarcoma (UN-diff-er-**EN**-she-ATE-id PLEE-o-**MORF**-ic sar-KO-muh): This is the most common kind of sarcoma in older adults. It's most often found in the arms or legs.

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org³. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
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