



Together we will think about your future,  
as well as your family's.

# Handbook for People Diagnosed with Cancer

## Preface

It is natural to become anxious and worried when you are diagnosed with cancer.

“Will cancer be cured?”, “Will I live longer?”, “What will be the treatment be like?”, “Do I need to be hospitalized?”, “Can I keep working?”, “How should I explain my cancer to my family?”

It can be difficult to fully understand your disease and treatment, especially if you are not familiar with Japanese language and customs, or if you're far away from home. Indeed, you need to adjust yourself to a different culture and the medical system to live with cancer in Japan.

Cancer is a disease that puts a strain on the body and mind due to its symptoms and treatment. You sometimes need to change the way you live because the treatment and its side-effects may affect your life and continue for a long time.

This handbook is written with a hope to be of help for those who are diagnosed with cancer. It is intended to be used as a reference when thinking about your life and future. It contains information about cancer, its tests and treatment, as well as things for international people to keep in mind while receiving cancer care in Japan.

National Center for Global Health and Medicine is certified as a designated cancer hospital by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. Designated cancer hospitals meet a set of requirements to provide patients with quality cancer care, information and consultation support. We also have a support desk at the International Health Care Center to help international patients. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact [support@jihns.go.jp](mailto:support@jihns.go.jp).

02

## Table of contents

### 1 What is cancer? ... 04

Mechanism of cancer / Cancer is not a rare disease  
Types of cancer / What happens to the body

### 2 Tests to diagnose cancer ... 07

Imaging tests / Pathology tests / Tumor markers

### 3 Before selecting a cancer treatment ... 10

### 4 What is cancer treatment like? ... 12

Standard care / Types of cancer treatment  
Surgery / Anti-cancer drugs  
Radiation therapy / Palliative care / Other

### 5 Things to consider along with treatment ... 18

Mental health / Life and living / Family  
Advance care planning

Column

Unproven cancer therapies and misinformation ... 21

### 6 About the Cancer Support Center

... 22

### 7 For those who receive treatment in Japan

... 23

### About the International Health Care Center

... 24



# 1

## What is cancer?



### Mechanism of cancer

Our body consists of many small cells, and each cell has genes which together form a blueprint of the human body. Cancer is a disease that happens when those genes are damaged for some reason, causing cells to multiply in a disorderly fashion within the body.



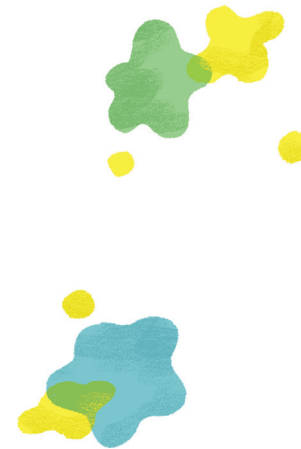
### Cancer is not a rare disease

More than 20 million people are diagnosed with cancer every year worldwide. This is expected to increase further in the future, reflecting an aging and growing population, as well as change in exposure to risk factors. Cancer is by no means a rare disease.



### Types of cancer

Lung cancer, stomach cancer, colorectal cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer, blood cancer... there are many types of cancer. And even within a single type of cancer, the symptoms, optimal treatment, or coping methods are different depending on its biology and how far it has spread. While all “cancer” may sound like the same thing, it’s important to fully understand the characteristics and condition of your cancer.





# 2

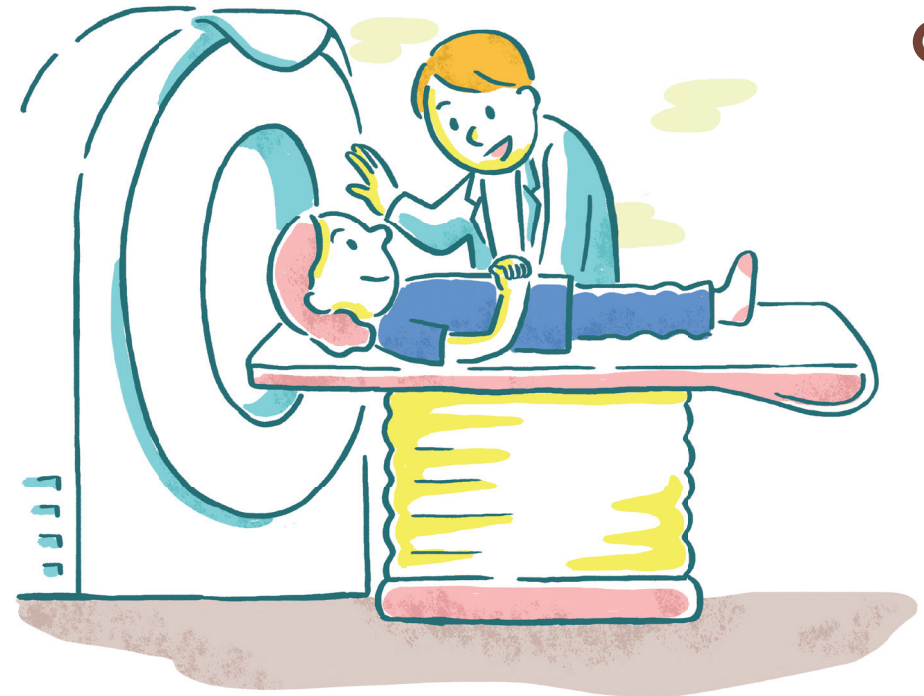
## Tests to investigate cancer

06

### What happens to the body

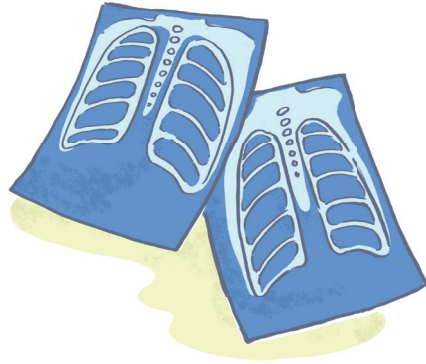
Cancer can develop anywhere in the body. Different symptoms may appear depending on the location of the cancer. For example, if you have cancer in your lungs, you may feel shortness of breath or coughing. Cancer inside the abdomen may cause bloating or difficulty passing stool. You may feel a loss of appetite, fatigue, or pain because of the cancer-itself. Don't hesitate to talk with your doctor or medical staff about your symptoms, even if they seem minor. The doctor will think about the cause of the symptoms and the ways to relieve them.

07



## Imaging tests

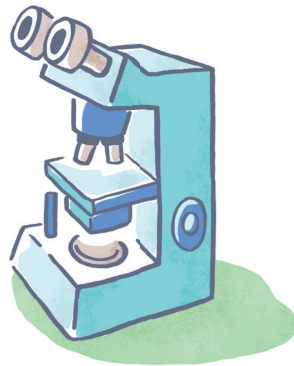
Imaging tests such as X-ray, CT, PET, and MRI are used to precisely detect the location of lesions in the body. Imaging alone cannot diagnose cancer, but it can provide critical information about its spread.



08

## Pathology tests

Diagnosis of cancer is confirmed by pathology tests. Usually, part of a suspicious lesion is removed using a needle or endoscope (biopsy), and is further examined under a microscope. Sometimes blood, bone marrow, or urine are used for these tests. Pathology tests can also provide information on the biology of the cancer which is often important in selecting anti-cancer drugs.



## Tumor markers

Tumor markers are substances that are produced by cancer. They are found in blood and urine samples, and are sometimes referenced to determine the degree of cancer progression. There are many different tumor markers, for many different kinds of cancer. However, there are cases where the tumor marker is not positive even though there's cancer (false negative), or it is positive even though there is no cancer (false positive). Tumor markers should be used in combination with other tests.

09





# 3



## Before selecting a cancer treatment

10

Cancer treatment is selected according to the type, characteristics, and spread of the cancer. Imaging and pathology tests play a big role, but equally important are the thoughts and values of the patient and their family. To start with, ask your doctor all the questions you have about your disease. Additionally, think about the life you would like to have. Our medical staff is ready to help you choose the treatment that is best for you.



### Second opinion

At some point you may not be fully satisfied with your doctor's explanation, or want an explanation from another doctor. If that happens, you have the right to a second opinion.

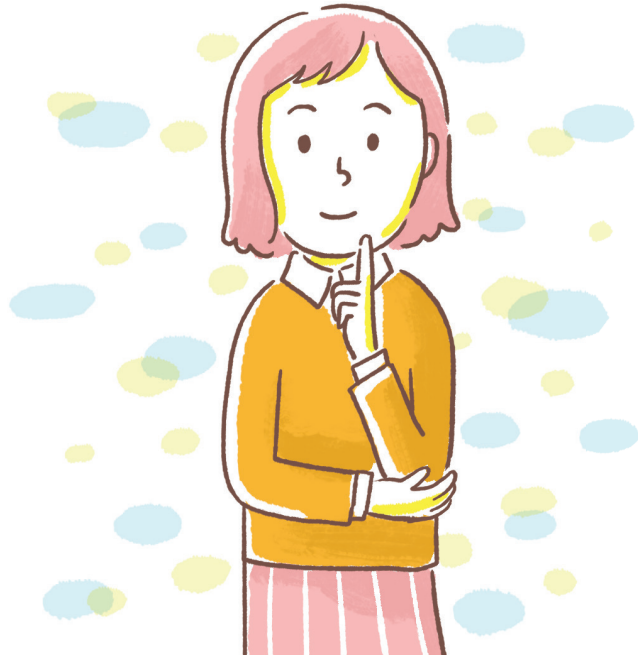
A second opinion allows you to hear the opinion of another specialist without changing your physician or hospital. You can do so by asking your doctor to prepare documents including a medical report, test results, and so on. After receiving a second opinion you will have a deeper understanding of your disease and treatment, which in turn helps you choose treatment that you fully agree with. Therefore, you are encouraged to get a second opinion if you have any concerns. Getting a second opinion will not hurt your relationship with your doctor in any way. The procedure for making a second opinion appointment and associated fees (which are not covered by Japanese insurance) vary by hospital, so check them before your visit.

11

# 4

## What is cancer treatment like?

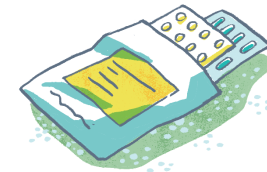
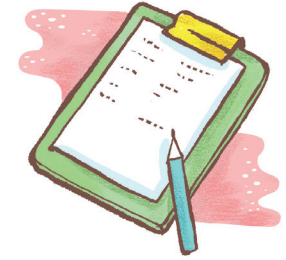
12



### Standard care



Cancer treatments are improving every day. Standard care is the treatment and care recommended as the best based on the data of many patients. The word “standard” may make it sound ordinary, but standard care is the best available treatment supported by scientific evidence.



13

### Types of cancer treatment



There are several different methods to treat cancer. Depending on the disease’s condition, several methods may be combined. Also, cancer care is often provided by collaboration of multiple specialists.



## 1 Surgery

Surgery is a cancer treatment usually used when the cancer is confined to limited parts of the body. It is done to remove the cancer lesion, or sometimes to relieve symptoms. Surgeons will determine if surgery is indicated based on its effectiveness and risk.



14



## 2 Anti-cancer drugs

Medication therapy is a treatment aimed controlling cancer which has spread throughout the body. Anti-cancer medication includes cytotoxic drugs (chemotherapy), endocrine therapy, immunotherapy, and other molecular-targeted drugs. Medications are administered via an IV drip, injection, or orally.



### Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy inhibits cancer cell proliferation by preventing cell division.

### Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy uses the body's immune system to fight cancer cells.

### Endocrine therapy (hormonal therapy)

Endocrine therapy suppresses hormones that some types of cancer use to grow.

### Other molecular-targeted drugs

Other molecular-targeted drugs inhibit the function of specific molecules related to cancer growth and metastasis.

15

### 3 Radiation therapy

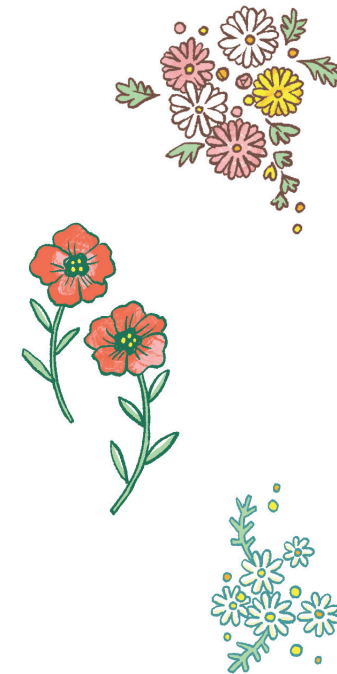
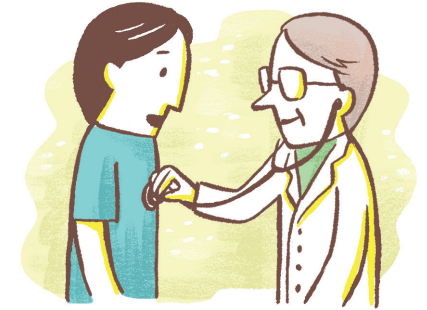
Radiation therapy uses radiation to reduce the size of cancer or to relieve pain confined to one part of the body. The direction and intensity of radiation are adjusted to minimize their effect on normal body tissue.



16

### 4 Palliative care

From the moment you know you have cancer you may face difficulties both physically and mentally, along with worries about your daily life. Our palliative care team will help you ease such difficulties and worries. Their services are available from the moment you are diagnosed with cancer and whenever you need them.



17

### 5 Other

There are other specific treatments, depending on the type of cancer. For example, hematopoietic stem cell transplant may be an option for blood cancer. Gene analysis may be able to identify effective drugs for a patient's specific cancer (genomic medicine).

# 5

## Things to consider along with treatment

18



### Mental health

When you are sick not only does your body become unstable, but sometimes your emotions may also become unstable. You may not be able to sleep well or concentrate on your work. If that happens don't keep it to yourself, but talk with medical staff. We will think about ways to cope with it with you.



19



### Life and living

Cancer is not like a cold that is easily cured with some medicine – you may need to live with the disease for a long time. Nurses and social workers are available to guide you with your concerns about your daily life, such as school-life, work and money.



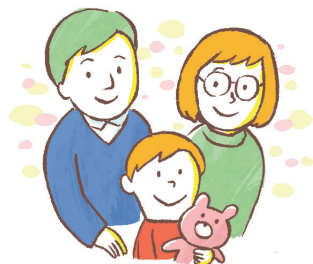
## Family

The support and understanding of family and people close to you is essential in cancer treatment. To make that support possible you need to tell them about your disease. You can also have the doctor explain your disease to family members or someone important to you. If you're wondering how to tell your child about the disease, there are staff members who can help you. If you're worried because you live alone, social workers will work with you. If you are uneasy about talking with your doctor alone, a nurse or other medical staff can join the conversation.



20

## Advance care planning



Cancer can put you into a situation where you are unable to communicate your own health care decisions. It is important that you share your thoughts with your doctors and loved ones to have a sense of control in decision when the future is uncertain.



## Unproven cancer therapies and misinformation

It is natural that you want to seek the best possible treatment. However, there is a lot of inaccurate information in the world. You may have seen claims like, "My cancer disappeared with this diet", or "I was cured with this supplement".

The internet has all such kinds of information, from trustworthy to utter nonsense, and you should know that some things written on the internet don't apply to every patient. What can we do to protect ourselves from inaccurate information?

Clinical practice guidelines, explaining optimal therapy based on scientific evidence, are available for most types of cancer. The easiest way to learn about them is to ask your doctor. We are here to make sure your treatment is provided with your fully, voluntary consent. So please don't hesitate to ask us any questions you have. You can also consult the Cancer Support Center for general issues and various concerns on your daily life and future plan.

### Beware of phrases such as

Absolutely curable   100% effective   Zero side effects   Cancer disappeared

If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

21



# 6

## About the Cancer Support Center

22

---

Designated cancer hospitals have a Cancer Support Center, where specialized advisors (social workers, nurses, etc.) are available for consultation. The Cancer Support Center helps alleviate your concern by sorting out your situation and discussing the best solution for your problem.

# 7

## For those who receive cancer treatment in Japan



23

---

We understand that being diagnosed with cancer while away from your home country can cause a lot of stress and anxiety. Cancer treatment can harm your body, and sometimes treatment effects are not clear. Therefore, it is important that you get necessary information and we decide on a course of treatment together, so that you can maintain a balance between cancer treatment, your daily life, and future plans.

〈The information you need to know to make your own decision〉

#Condition of cancer

# Goals of treatment and prognosis

#Treatment options (schedule, cost, hospitalization, frequency of hospital visits, etc.)

#Desired effect of the treatment, along with possible complications and side effects

#About the Japanese medical system (medical costs, nursing/ healthcare services, etc.)

#People who can support you (family, friends and other supporters)

Everyone has their own set of values. Therefore, it is important that you fully understand the information about your cancer and treatment, as you are the one who will be receiving the treatment. You should clarify what is important for you before deciding on a treatment. The process can be tough, but many people are available to help you come to a decision not only doctors but also nurses, social workers, psychologists, and other professionals.

It's also important that you're open with your family and share what you're feeling. You can also ask for support from community members who have the same cultural background. Some hospitals have a specialized department with knowledge about many different languages and cultures that can assist patients in receiving treatment, but they are few in number. If you have any problems or concerns, don't hesitate to talk to family, friends, and us. You are not alone.

Communication is essential in these situations, and therefore language is key. We will do our best to make sure any language differences do not interfere with treatment. At the same time, we ask that you make an effort to understand the information we provide, and to share your thoughts and feelings with us.

Some hospitals charge a fee for interpreting services at the time of consultation. Please check if a hospital charges interpretation fees before you visit.



## International Health Care Center

You may have questions concerning language, culture, money, the medical system, etc. The International Health Care Center will support you and your family in getting those questions answered by arranging for an interpreter or explaining our services and systems to you.

〈Things to remember when receiving cancer care in Japan〉

Below are some points to check when you are suspected to have cancer, or have been diagnosed with cancer.

- Did the doctor tell you how long the test or treatment would take?
- Do you need to renew your visa or health insurance during the treatment period?
- Are you planning to return to your home country? Would you like to receive treatment in your home country?

We will make a care plan in accordance with your visa and your health insurance, as well as in accordance with your wishes to have treatment in Japan or to return to your home country.



Edit  
Japan Institute for Health Security  
National Center for Global Health and medicine  
Cancer Support Center

Date of Publication 1st March 2026.