

General cancer signs and symptoms

You should know some of the general (non-specific) signs and symptoms of cancer. But remember, having any of these does not mean that you have cancer – many other things cause these signs and symptoms, too.

Unexplained weight loss

Most people with cancer will lose weight at some point. An unexplained weight loss of 10 pounds or more (when you're not trying to lose weight) may be the first sign of cancer. This happens most often with cancers of the pancreas, stomach, esophagus, or lung.

Fever

Fever is very common with cancer, but it more often happens after cancer has spread from where it started. Almost all patients with cancer will have fever at some time, especially if the cancer or its treatment affects the immune system. This can make it harder for the body to fight infection. Less often, fever may be an early sign of cancer, such as blood cancers like leukemia or lymphoma.

Fatigue

Fatigue is extreme tiredness that does not get better with rest. It may be an important symptom as cancer grows. It may happen early, though, in cancers like leukemia, or if the cancer is causing blood loss, which can happen with some colon or stomach cancers.

Pain

Pain may be an early symptom with some cancers such as bone cancers or testicular cancer. A headache that does not go away or respond to treatment may be a symptom of a brain tumor. Back pain can be a symptom of cancer of the colon, rectum, or ovary. Most often, pain that is linked to cancer is a symptom of cancer that has already metastasized (spread from where it started).

Skin changes

Along with cancers of the skin (see the next section), some other cancers can cause skin symptoms or signs that can be seen. These signs and symptoms include:

- darker looking skin (hyperpigmentation)
- yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- reddened skin (erythema)
- itching
- excessive hair growth

Signs and symptoms of certain cancers

Along with the general symptoms, you should watch for certain other common symptoms and signs which could suggest cancer. Again, there may be other causes for each of these, but it is important to see a doctor about them as soon as possible.

Change in bowel habits or bladder function

Long-term constipation, diarrhea, or a change in the size of the stool may be a sign of colon cancer. Pain when passing urine, blood in the urine, or a change in bladder function (such as needing to pass urine more or less often than usual) could be related to bladder or prostate cancer. Any changes in bladder or bowel function should be reported to a doctor.

Sores that do not heal

Skin cancers may bleed and look like sores that do not heal. A long-lasting sore in the mouth could be an oral cancer and should be dealt with right away, especially in people who smoke, chew tobacco, or often drink alcohol. Sores on the penis or vagina may either be signs of infection or an early cancer, and should not be ignored.

White patches inside the mouth or white spots on the tongue

White patches inside the mouth and white spots on the tongue may be leukoplakia. Leukoplakia is a pre-cancerous area that is caused by ongoing irritation. It is often caused by smoking or other tobacco use. People who smoke pipes or use oral or spit tobacco are at high risk for developing leukoplakia. If it is not treated, leukoplakia can become oral cancer. Any long-lasting mouth changes should be checked by a doctor or dentist right away.

Unusual bleeding or discharge

Unusual bleeding can happen in early or advanced cancer. Blood in the sputum (phlegm) may be a sign of lung cancer. Blood in the stool (or a dark or black stool) could be a sign of colon or rectal cancer. Cancer of the cervix or the endometrium (lining of the uterus) can cause unusual vaginal bleeding. Blood in the urine may be a sign of bladder or kidney cancer. A bloody discharge from the nipple may be a sign of breast cancer.

Thickening or lump in the breast or other parts of the body

Many cancers can be felt through the skin. These cancers occur mostly in the breast, testicle, lymph nodes (glands), and the soft tissues of the body. A lump or thickening may be an early or late sign of cancer and should be reported to a doctor, especially if you've just found it or notice it has grown in size.

Indigestion or trouble swallowing

While they most often are caused by other things, indigestion or swallowing problems may be signs of cancer of the esophagus (the swallowing tube that goes to the stomach), stomach, or pharynx (throat).

Recent change in a wart or mole or any new skin change

Any wart, mole, or freckle that changes color, size, or shape, or loses its definite borders should be reported to a doctor right away. Any new skin changes should be reported as well. A skin change may be a melanoma which, if found early, can be treated successfully.

Nagging cough or hoarseness

A cough that does not go away may be a sign of lung cancer. Hoarseness can be a sign of cancer of the larynx (voice box) or thyroid.

Although the signs and symptoms listed are the ones more commonly seen with cancer, there are many others that are less common and are not listed here. If you notice any major changes in the way your body works or the way you feel, especially if it lasts for a long time or gets worse, let a doctor know. If it has nothing to do with cancer, the doctor can find out more about what's going on and treat it, if needed. If it is cancer, you'll give yourself the best chance to have it treated early, when treatment is most likely to be effective.

Source; American Cancer Society (ACS)