

# Advanced Bladder Cancer

Being given a diagnosis of advanced bladder cancer is bound to be a shock, and it can take a while to come to terms with what this means.



**Advanced bladder cancer** is when the cancer has spread from where it started in the bladder to another part of the body. Your cancer may be advanced when it is first diagnosed. (Or it may have returned some time after you were first treated. This is called **recurrent cancer**.)

The cancer can spread into parts of the body close to the bladder. This is called **local spread**. This would be in places like your ureters, urethra, prostate, vagina or into the pelvis.

Cancer that has spread to another part of the body is called a **secondary cancer** or **metastasis**. If bladder cancer does spread, it is most likely to spread to your lymph nodes, lungs, liver or bones.

## Advanced bladder cancer symptoms

The symptoms of advanced bladder cancer depend on which part of the body the cancer has spread to. A common symptom is weight loss. Other symptoms can include:

- swollen legs
- pain in your bones
- pain in your tummy
- lumps in your abdomen or neck
- yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes (jaundice)

Some people feel increasingly tired when their cancer has spread. Do remember, though, that there are also lots of other reasons for feeling tired.

From time to time you are likely to have aches and pains and days when you don't feel very good. Naturally you may worry that they are due to the cancer or its treatment, but they may not necessarily be. Check with your doctor or specialist nurse about any symptom that is worrying you. They will be able to reassure you.



## Advanced bladder cancer treatments

For bladder cancer that has spread, the treatment you receive will depend on how much it has spread, where it has spread to, what treatment you have already had, and your age and general fitness.

If your cancer has grown through the bladder wall or has spread to the local lymph nodes but no further, it is called **locally advanced bladder cancer**.

In this situation having your bladder removed or radiotherapy treatment may cure the cancer. As well as treatment to your bladder, you may have nearby lymph nodes removed or have radiotherapy treatment to them. These treatments would be followed by a form of chemotherapy.

If your cancer has spread to another body organ, then unfortunately treatment is not likely to cure it. It may, however, control it for some time and help to reduce symptoms.

Treatments may include:

- chemotherapy into a vein
- radiotherapy
- surgery to remove the cancer
- unblocking the ureters or urethra
- medicines to strengthen your bones if the cancer has spread there

Do talk to your specialist or specialist nurse about the treatment choices in your particular situation. If you wonder why a particular type of treatment isn't an option, just ask. Your specialist can then explain this to you.

## More about the treatments

### CHEMOTHERAPY

Chemotherapy can help to control or get rid of advanced bladder cancer for some time. Some types of chemotherapy, however, can be very intensive – taking a few months and involving a lot of side effects. Intensive chemotherapy is used to treat invasive bladder cancer.

In particular, older people who are less fit may find the side effects of intensive chemotherapy too severe. You may have less-intensive types of chemotherapy if you are very unwell due to the cancer, or if you have:

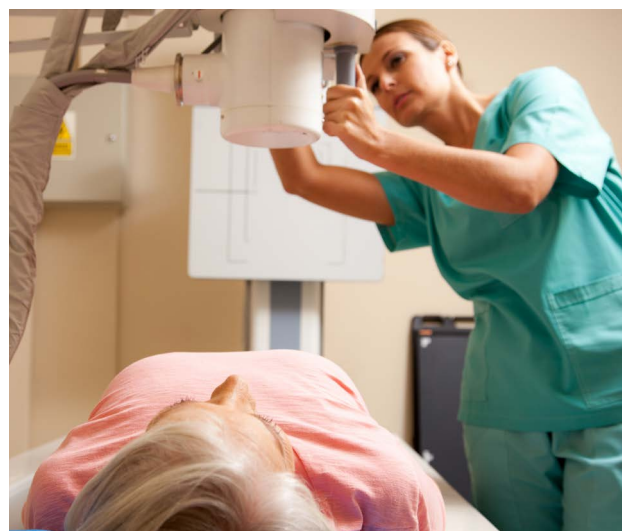
- other medical conditions, such as heart, lung or liver problems
- poor kidney function
- widespread secondary (metastatic) cancer
- cancer severely affecting your liver or lungs

The less-intensive types of chemotherapy can still be very effective at shrinking the cancer and slowing its growth. You would need to discuss with your doctor which type of chemotherapy is most suitable for you. Doctors often use a combination of two chemotherapy drugs called Gemcitabine and Carboplatin (GemCarbo).

If you received chemotherapy when you were first treated, your doctor will assess how well it worked for you then. You can then decide whether it is likely to work well now, or whether other chemotherapy drugs may work better for you.

### RADIOTHERAPY

Your specialist may suggest radiotherapy if your advanced bladder cancer is causing symptoms. Radiotherapy can work very well where the cancer has spread to a bone and is causing pain, for example. Sometimes the treatment is given in one session, but other people have a few treatment sessions. The radiotherapy will not cure your cancer but it can improve the quality of your life. It can help to keep the cancer under control in the area of the body that has been treated.



The side effects from radiotherapy depend on which part of the body is treated. So it is difficult to give general information about them. When radiotherapy is being given to treat symptoms, doctors try to keep the side effects down to a minimum. If you are having just one treatment, or a short course, you may have few side effects.

If you had radiotherapy to your bladder and pelvis when you were first treated, then you will probably not be able to have any more to that area. This is because there is a limit to the amount of radiation any part of the body can have. However, you can have radiotherapy to another part of the body if necessary.

### **SURGERY TO REMOVE CANCER FROM THE BLADDER**

If you still have cancer inside your bladder, or if it has grown back, it can make it painful or difficult to pass urine. The pressure of the cancer growing inside the bladder can be uncomfortable. The cancer may also sometimes bleed. Your specialist may suggest removing most of the cancer to stop the bleeding and slow down its growth.

### **UNBLOCKING THE URETERS OR KIDNEY**

Sometimes the cancer can block your ureters or kidney. This can make your wee build up in the kidney and stop it from working properly. Relieving the blockage can help the kidney to work normally again, relieve symptoms and improve your kidney function – results that may mean that you are able to have chemotherapy.

Your doctor may suggest an operation to bypass the blockage caused by the cancer. In one type of operation, the doctor puts a small tube (a stent) inside the ureter to allow the wee to drain. Your doctor may put a tube (called a nephrostomy tube) through the skin and into the blocked kidney to drain the wee into a bag outside of your body. Then, later on, it may be possible to pass a stent into the ureter so that wee can drain from the kidney into the bladder.

Your doctor will do these procedures to try to relieve your symptoms. It is important that the benefit of having an operation will be greater than the drawbacks. You and your doctor will need to talk this through beforehand.

### **MEDICINES FOR SECONDARY BONE CANCER**

If your cancer has spread to your bones your doctor may suggest that you have drug treatment. When cancer spreads to the bones

it can cause pain and weaken them. When the bones are weaker they break more easily. There are different treatments you may be able to have that help strengthen your bones and prevent problems.

### **Deciding about treatment**

For some people their treatment aims to cure the cancer. However, if your treatment is aiming to slow the cancer and control symptoms, it can be difficult to decide which one to try, or whether to have treatment at all. You will need to think about how the treatment will affect your quality of life. This includes the possible side effects as well as stresses, such as travelling to and from the hospital. Most importantly you will need to understand what can be achieved with the treatment you are being offered.

Your doctor will discuss your treatment options with you. There may be a counsellor or specialist nurse at the hospital you can chat to. You may also want to talk things over with a close relative or friend. After you have had time to think about the options, you and your specialist will make the final decision together. It can be helpful to talk over difficult decisions with someone who is outside your circle of family and friends.

### **What happens after treatment?**

After your treatment has finished, you will need to have regular check-ups. These may include:

- cystoscopy, if you still have your bladder
- x-rays
- CT scans
- urine tests
- blood tests

You won't have all of these tests at each visit to your specialist, but your doctor will almost certainly examine you. They will ask how you feel and whether you have had any new symptoms or worries.

If you are worried, or notice any new symptoms between appointments, you must let your doctor or specialist nurse know straight away. You don't have to wait for your next appointment.

You may find your check-ups quite worrying, especially at first. If you are feeling well and getting on with life, a hospital appointment can bring all of the worry about your cancer back to you.

You may find it helpful to tell someone close to you how you feel. If you are able to share your worries, they may not seem quite as bad. Many people find it helpful to have someone with them when they go to their check-ups. This gives some support. You can also talk with your companion beforehand about any questions you may want to ask and they can help you remember the answers afterwards.

If you find that worry is seriously affecting your life, you may need more help. It is quite common these days for people to have counselling after cancer treatment. This is a way of exploring more deeply what is worrying you and helping you come to terms with it. Talk to your doctor if you would like this help.

## What to ask your doctor about treating advanced bladder cancer

- What treatment do you recommend for bladder cancer that has spread?
- What is the aim of the treatment?
- What are the side effects of the treatment?
- Is there anything that can help with the side effects?
- What happens if my cancer comes back again after this treatment?
- Are there any experimental treatments or trials you would recommend for me?
- Is there a counsellor I could talk things through with?
- Is there a specialist nurse I could see?
- What happens if I decide not to have treatment?

## Our best advice

Our best advice is to be open and talk to people about your cancer diagnosis. If you find this difficult with family or friends, then please do use our [Confidential Forum](#) or our [Bladder Buddy Service](#).





### **About Fight Bladder Cancer**

Fight Bladder Cancer is the only patient and carer led charity for bladder cancer in the UK.

At Fight Bladder Cancer, we take great care to provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts about bladder cancer. We have a very supportive medical advice panel made up of some of the best professionals working with bladder cancer, and hope that our information will add to the medical advice you have had and help you to make decisions.

To donate, go to our **Just Giving** page:

[justgiving.com/fightbladdercancer](https://www.justgiving.com/fightbladdercancer)

or text **FBCD00 £5 to 70070**

Registered charity **1157763**

Please note that our services are not intended to replace advice from your medical team.

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YOU CAN FIND A WEALTH OF INFORMATION, SUPPORT  
AND ADDITIONAL DOWNLOADS ON OUR WEBSITE:

**[fightbladdercancer.co.uk](https://www.fightbladdercancer.co.uk)**