

What is Cancer?

When Leah Davis began bleeding from the mouth, she went directly to her dentist. One brief look – and he sent her straight to the emergency room.

"I actually didn't believe the E.R. doctor when he gave me that initial diagnosis. I really believed that it was something else going on with my body."-Leah

The diagnosis: Acute Myeloid Leukemia or AML – an aggressive cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

"I had no idea what I was going through."-Leah, Patient

"Take some deep breaths in and out ..."-Doctor

For Leah, gaining an understanding of her condition was the first step toward dealing with it. Though there are many different kinds of cancer, they all start the same way.

"Cancer is an example of a good cell gone bad. Cancer typically arises from normal cells within the body, and some sort of abnormality causes them to transform into a cell that is no longer controlled by the body, or the immune system, the way it should be."-Dr. Sagar Lonial, MD, Oncologist

Once tests confirm the type of cancer, its size and whether it has spread, the health care team can customize an individual treatment plan.

This may include: the goal of treatment – whether cure, extending life, or relieving symptoms, the specific treatment or treatments you'll receive, where you'll receive them, how often and how long you'll receive them, possible side effects, and follow-up care after treatment.

"The plan is how you're going to attack it. And that's what patients want to hear. They want to know, "Okay, I've got something I've got to deal with. But here's how I'm gonna try and fix it."-Dr. Sagar Lonial, MD, Oncologist

Depending on the cancer, as well as your age and overall health, treatment typically involves surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, or some combination.

Other options may include: Immunotherapy, which boosts the body's natural defenses to fight the cancer, Targeted therapy, which targets proteins and other substances that help cancer cells grow and spread, Hormone therapy, which blocks or interferes with hormones that promote cancer growth, and a Stem cell transplant, which replaces bone marrow that has been destroyed by high-dose chemotherapy or radiation.

"Any questions about it?"-Nurse

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When cancer is not curable, treatment can allow some people to live with the disease.

"The analogy that I make is like hypertension. When you have hypertension, are you ever cured of that hypertension? Probably not. You take your blood pressure pill and it controls the hypertension. And so yes, cure is our ideal situation, but there are diseases where we can control it just like it's hypertension or diabetes."-Dr. Sagar Lonial, MD, Oncologist

When Leah received her treatment plan for leukemia, her doctor's words boosted her confidence.

"He said, "What you have is curable, and he said we want to cure it." And he gave me the percentage, and he just talked with me. He said, you know these are the steps that we'll take."-Leah, Patient

Following months of aggressive chemotherapy, Leah underwent a successful stem cell transplant. Today she's returning to a normal life and determined to reach full recovery.

"I'm doing great today. I am back at work// I'm exercising// hair is growing back, you know so and I'm feeling good. I feel good."-Leah, Patient