

Diagnosing Thyroid Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'Diagnosing thyroid cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- Tests for thyroid cancer
- Further tests for thyroid cancer
- What to ask your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Tests for thyroid cancer

Usually you begin by seeing your GP, who will examine you and ask about your general health. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, and will examine your neck. They will probably ask you to go for a blood test to check your thyroid hormone levels. If your doctor then feels that you need further tests, they will refer you to a specialist at your local hospital.

At the hospital

The specialist will ask about your medical history and symptoms. They will then examine you by feeling your neck. You may have a chest X-ray to check your general health. If you haven't had them done already, you will have some blood tests to check your thyroid hormone and thyroid antibody levels. Your doctor may arrange a needle biopsy and an ultrasound scan (a scan which uses sound waves to build up a picture of the inside of the body). These tests will be in the outpatient department.

A needle biopsy is used to take a small amount of thyroid tissue, which a pathologist (an expert who examines and identifies cells) can then examine. This is the only way to be sure if a lump is cancer or not. The doctor puts a very thin needle into the lump and sucks out a small amount of fluid and cells. They send the biopsy sample to the laboratory to be looked at under a microscope. You may have the needle biopsy done under a local anaesthetic (a drug which stops feeling, especially pain). Sometimes a surgical biopsy is needed. This means the doctor makes a small cut with a scalpel into the skin near the thyroid gland and removes a small piece of thyroid tissue. This is usually done under general anaesthetic.

Further tests for thyroid cancer

If tests show you have thyroid cancer, your specialist will ask you to have further tests to see how big the cancer is and whether it has spread. This will help your doctor to decide which treatment you need. Your doctor will examine your neck and nearby areas to see if there are any enlarged lymph nodes (a network of glands throughout the body) that may contain cancer cells from your thyroid cancer. Further tests may include CT or MRI scans. Sometimes, thyroid scans (using a very small amount of radioactive iodine) or PET scans are used after treatment. They can see if any cancer cells are left.

After the tests

You will be asked to go back to the hospital when your test results have come through. This is bound to take a little time, even if only a day or two. You may feel very anxious while you are waiting for results. It may help to talk to your clinical nurse specialist (CNS), or a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about tests for thyroid cancer

- What tests are you going to do?
- What are you looking for?
- How urgent are the tests?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- Will the tests show whether my cancer can be operated on?
- Are any of the tests painful?
- Do any of the tests have after effects?
- Can I have these tests as an outpatient?
- Should I bring someone with me when I have the tests?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the test results?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0800 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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