

Patient education: Anal cancer (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is anal cancer? — Anal cancer happens when normal cells lining the anus change into abnormal cells and grow out of control. The anus is the last part of the digestive tract ([figure 1](#)), where bowel movements leave the body.

What are the symptoms of anal cancer? — Anal cancer does not always cause symptoms at first. People who do have symptoms can have:

- Bleeding from their anus
- Pain in or around their anus
- A growth in their anus
- Itching in their anus

All of these symptoms can also be caused by conditions that are not cancer. But if you have these symptoms, tell your doctor or nurse.

Is there a test for anal cancer? — Yes. To check for anal cancer, your doctor or nurse will look at your anus and do a "digital rectal exam." During a digital rectal exam, your doctor or nurse will put a gloved finger into your anus and lower rectum to feel for abnormal growths.

He or she might do 1 or more of the following tests:

- Anoscopy — During an anoscopy, the doctor puts a short tube with a light on the end (called an "anoscope") into your anus and rectum. He or she will use the anoscope to look for abnormal areas or growths.
- Biopsy — A doctor can remove a small sample of tissue from the anus. Another doctor will look at the sample under a microscope to see if it has cancer.

Doctors sometimes find cells in the anus that are not cancer, but are abnormal and have a high chance of turning into cancer. Your doctor can treat these "pre-cancer" cells in different ways. He or she might remove them to help keep them from turning into cancer. Or he or she might watch them closely over time.

What is anal cancer staging? — Cancer staging is a way in which doctors find out if a cancer has spread past the layer of tissue where it began and, if so, how far.

The right treatment for you will depend on the stage of your anal cancer, and your other medical problems.

How is anal cancer treated? — Most people with anal cancer are treated with both:

- Radiation therapy — Radiation kills cancer cells.
- Chemotherapy — Chemotherapy is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing.

Anal cancer is sometimes treated with surgery to remove the cancer. But most people don't need surgery. People do not need surgery if their cancer gets better with chemotherapy and radiation.

What happens after treatment? — After treatment, you will be checked every so often to see if the cancer comes back. Regular follow up tests include exams (including digital rectal exams) and anoscopy. Some people also have follow-up imaging tests. Imaging tests can create pictures of the inside of your body.

You should also watch for the symptoms listed above. Having those symptoms could mean the cancer has come back. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any symptoms.

What happens if the cancer comes back or spreads? — If the cancer comes back or spreads, you might need surgery or more chemotherapy.

What else should I do? — It is important to follow all your doctor's instructions about visits and tests. It's also important to talk to your doctor about any side effects or problems you have during treatment.

Getting treated for anal cancer involves making many choices, such as what treatment to have.

Always let your doctors and nurses know how you feel about a treatment. Any time you are offered a treatment, ask:

- What are the benefits of this treatment? Is it likely to help me live longer? Will it reduce or prevent symptoms?
- What are the downsides to this treatment?
- Are there other options besides this treatment?
- What happens if I do not have this treatment?

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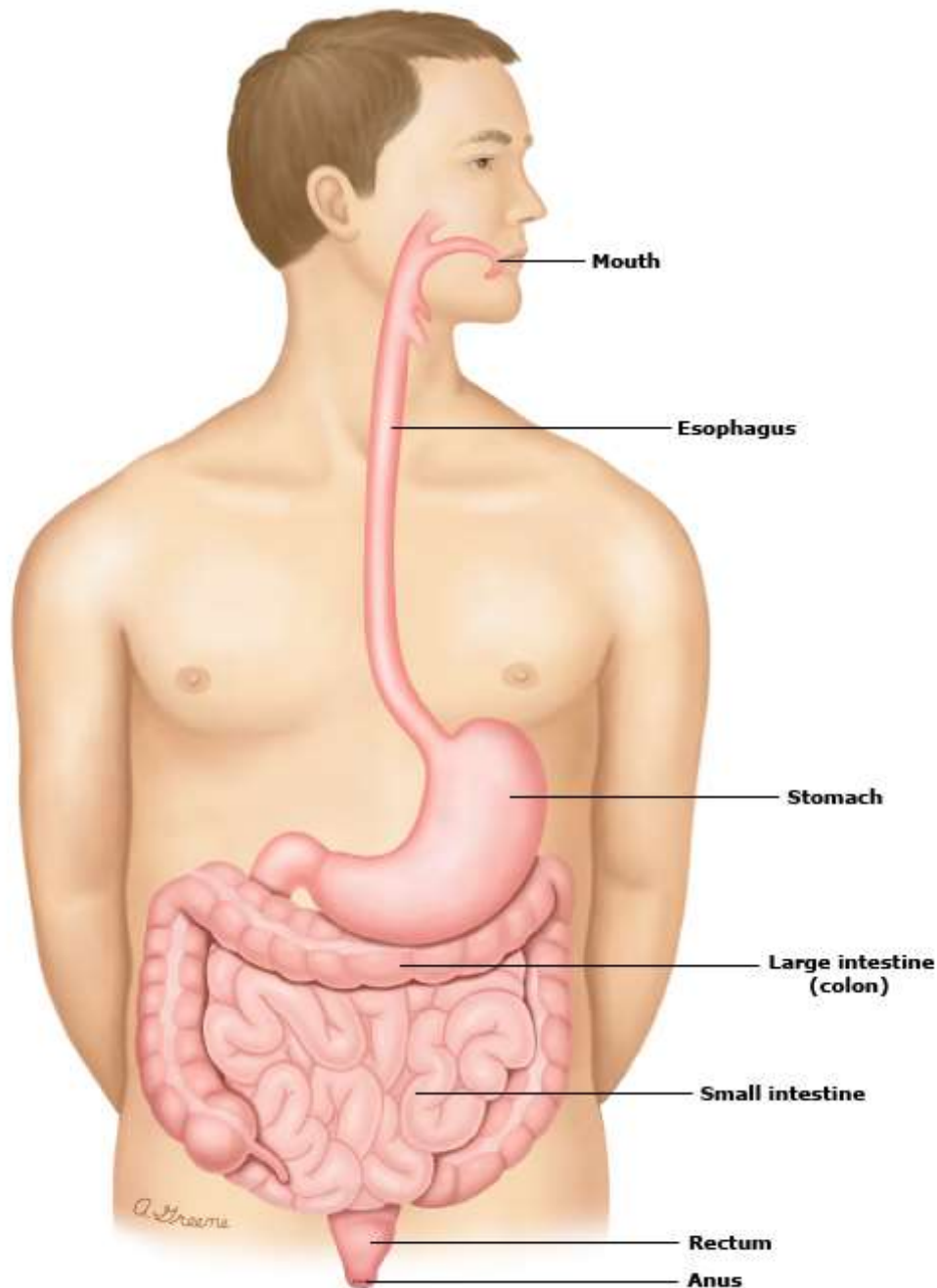
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GRAPHICS

Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

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