



# WHAT TO DO AFTER A LUNG CANCER DIAGNOSIS

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A Comprehensive Guide for Patients and Families

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*Clear Information. Compassionate Support.*

# INTRODUCTION

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## *A Diagnosis That Changes Everything*

A lung cancer diagnosis often arrives suddenly, even for people who felt healthy just weeks or months before. In a single moment, your life can seem to split into “before” and “after.” Many patients say they remember where they were, what they were doing, or even the smallest details of the moment they heard the words “you have lung cancer.” This reaction is natural. The mind tries to make sense of something completely unexpected and overwhelming.

In the days that follow, it’s common to feel a blur of emotions such as fear, confusion, disbelief, anger, or even numbness. Family members and caregivers may feel just as shocked or unsure about what comes next. During this difficult time, having clear, reliable information can create a sense of stability. Even when everything feels uncertain, knowledge can become an anchor.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide was created to help you make sense of what you’re experiencing. It is not meant to rush you or overwhelm you with medical terminology. Instead, it aims to provide steady, compassionate guidance that gives you room to breathe and space to understand your diagnosis step by step. No one should have to navigate lung cancer without support, and this resource is designed to serve as a companion throughout your journey.

You will find explanations of tests, treatments, and medical language—but also support for your emotional health, your family’s needs, and your practical concerns. Lung cancer affects every part of your life. That’s why this guide addresses the whole person: your physical body, your mind, your relationships, and your day-to-day routines.

## AN IMPORTANT REMINDER

**No two cancer journeys are the same.** Your diagnosis, your treatment plan, and your personal experience will be shaped by many factors: your health history, the type and stage of cancer, your support system, your culture, and your personal goals. This guide does not assume there is one “right” way to feel or to move forward. Instead, it offers information so you can ask informed questions and make decisions that feel right for you.

It's also natural to wonder “Why me?” Even people who never smoked can develop lung cancer, and risk factors like occupational exposure, environmental conditions, or genetic variations can play a role. Understanding these factors can sometimes help people make peace with what has happened, but it is equally valid if you never find a satisfying answer. What matters now is focusing on the steps ahead.

Finally, while this guide is written primarily for patients, it also includes vital information for caregivers and loved ones. Cancer does not happen to one person—it impacts an entire family or support network. Loved ones may worry about saying or doing the wrong thing, and caregivers may need reassurance and guidance just as much as patients.

This eBook aims to help provide clarity, calm, and confidence as you navigate this chapter of your life. Through each section, you will find information to help you understand your diagnosis, build your care team, explore treatment options, manage side effects, care for your emotional well-being, and reimagine life after treatment. Your path is unique, but you do not have to walk it alone.

# CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

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When you first receive a lung cancer diagnosis, it's normal for your mind to race with questions. Hearing unfamiliar terms, trying to interpret test results, and facing urgent decisions can feel overwhelming. The first step toward regaining a sense of control is understanding the basics of lung cancer—what type you have, how advanced it is, and what the initial tests mean.

## MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

There are two primary types of lung cancer: **non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)** and **small cell lung cancer (SCLC)**. NSCLC is the most common and tends to grow more slowly, which often allows for a wider range of treatment options. SCLC is less common but typically grows and spreads faster, making timely diagnosis and treatment especially important. Your care team will specify which type you have because it greatly influences the recommended treatment plan.

Another key component of understanding your diagnosis is staging. Staging describes how advanced the cancer is. For NSCLC, you might hear **Stage I through Stage IV**, while SCLC is usually categorized as either **limited stage** or **extensive stage**. The stage helps determine whether treatment will focus on localized tumors or on addressing cancer that has spread to distant areas.

You may also encounter many new medical terms—sometimes more than you feel you can possibly learn at once. Terms like *biopsy*, *PET scan*, *tumor markers*, and *lymph nodes* may become part of routine discussions. A **biopsy**, for example, involves removing a small sample of tissue to analyze under a microscope. A **PET scan** is a specialized imaging test that helps detect metabolic activity, often used to identify cancer spread.

Your doctor may order additional tests to identify specific genetic mutations or biomarkers, such as EGFR, ALK, ROS1, or PD-L1 levels. These markers can help determine whether targeted therapies or immunotherapies might be effective. Understanding these details can feel intimidating initially, but each piece of information is part of building the most effective treatment plan for you.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR YOUR DOCTOR'S VISITS

It is completely normal to forget questions during appointments, so writing them down ahead of time can be helpful. Some common questions include: *What type of lung cancer do I have? What stage is it? What treatment options do I have? Are there genetic tests I need? What symptoms should I expect?* Bringing a family member or friend to appointments can also help you feel supported and have someone to help process the information afterward.

As you learn more about your diagnosis, remember that you do not need to become an expert overnight. Understanding happens gradually. Each question you ask helps you gain clarity, and each bit of knowledge helps you play an active, empowered role in your care journey.

# CHAPTER 2: BUILDING YOUR CARE TEAM

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Lung cancer treatment is rarely handled by a single doctor. Instead, care is delivered by a diverse team of specialists who each bring essential expertise to your diagnosis and treatment plan. Understanding the members of your care team helps you know who to contact, what their role is, and how they will support you throughout your journey.

## YOUR CARE TEAM

Your primary physician in cancer treatment is typically a medical oncologist, who oversees your overall care plan, prescribes medications like chemotherapy or immunotherapy, and coordinates treatment with other specialists. A radiation oncologist handles all aspects of radiation treatment, while a thoracic surgeon may be involved if surgery is recommended.

You may also interact with other professionals, such as pulmonologists (lung specialists), radiologists, pathologists, oncology nurses, and respiratory therapists. Each plays a vital role.

Radiologists interpret imaging tests like CT scans and PET scans. Pathologists analyze biopsy samples. Oncology nurses serve as a consistent point of contact, helping you understand procedures, managing symptoms, and answering questions between visits.

## GETTING A SECOND OPINION

One of the most empowering steps you can take early on is seeking a second opinion. This is common practice in oncology—not a sign of mistrust. A second opinion can confirm your diagnosis, clarify treatment options, and sometimes reveal additional approaches or clinical trials that might not have been considered initially. Many cancer centers offer virtual consultations for added convenience.

## TREATMENT

Choosing where to receive treatment is another significant decision. Some patients prefer large, well-known cancer centers with access to cutting-edge treatments and research opportunities. Others prioritize convenience and choose community hospitals closer to home. There is no universally right choice; the best option depends on your needs, preferences, and support network.

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

You may also be introduced to supportive care professionals like social workers, nutritionists, mental health counselors, or palliative care specialists. These individuals focus on your overall well-being—not just your cancer. They can help with emotional challenges, nutritional needs, coping strategies, and practical matters like finances and caregiving.

As you move through your treatment journey, your care team will grow and change, but their shared goal remains the same: providing the most effective, compassionate care possible. Building a strong, trusting relationship with your team forms the foundation of a successful treatment journey.

## YOUR ONGOING TREATMENT

Communication with your care team is essential. You should feel comfortable expressing concerns, asking questions, and seeking clarification. A strong care team respects your voice and involves you in decision-making. If communication feels rushed or unclear, don't hesitate to request additional time, follow-up calls, or written summaries.

# CHAPTER 3: EXPLORING TREATMENT OPTIONS

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Lung cancer treatment is not one-size-fits-all. Your care team will recommend a plan based on many factors, including the type of lung cancer, its stage, its location, your overall health, and your personal preferences. Understanding these treatment options helps you feel more prepared and capable of making informed decisions.

## SURGERY

Surgery is often recommended for early-stage NSCLC when the cancer is localized and operable. Surgical options vary depending on the size and location of the tumor. A lobectomy removes one lobe of the lung, while a segmentectomy removes a smaller portion. In some cases, a pneumonectomy—the removal of an entire lung—may be necessary. Surgeons increasingly use minimally invasive techniques like video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) or robotic-assisted surgery, which may reduce recovery time.

## RADIATION THERAPY

Radiation therapy uses high-energy beams to destroy cancer cells. It may be used alone or alongside other treatments. Advanced techniques such as stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) allow for precise targeting of tumors, sometimes offering outcomes similar to surgery for patients who cannot undergo an operation.

## CHEMOTHERAPY

Chemotherapy is a central treatment option for many patients. It uses medications designed to kill rapidly dividing cells, including cancer cells. Chemotherapy can be delivered before surgery to shrink tumors, after surgery to reduce recurrence risk, or in combination with other treatments for more advanced stages. While chemotherapy may cause side effects like fatigue, nausea, and hair loss, supportive medications and newer treatment protocols can help manage these symptoms effectively.

## IMMUNOTHERAPY

Immunotherapy has transformed lung cancer treatment in recent years. These medications help your immune system recognize and destroy cancer cells. Drugs such as checkpoint inhibitors can be effective for certain patients, particularly those with high PD-L1 expression. Immunotherapy may be used alone or in combination with chemotherapy.

## TARGETED THERAPY

Targeted therapy focuses on cancer cells with specific genetic mutations. If your biopsy reveals mutations such as EGFR, ALK, or ROS1, targeted therapies may be a powerful and less invasive treatment option. These medications often come in pill form and may be more tolerable than traditional chemotherapy.

## CLINICAL TRIALS

In addition to these standard treatments, clinical trials offer access to emerging therapies. Clinical trials are carefully monitored research studies designed to test promising new treatments. Participating in a trial can offer benefits such as cutting-edge medications or novel combinations of therapies. Your oncologist can help identify trials that may be appropriate for your diagnosis.

## YOUR TREATMENT

Choosing the right treatment involves balancing factors such as effectiveness, potential side effects, your lifestyle, and your personal values. It's important to take time to consider your options carefully, ask questions, and involve your support network as needed. There is no rush to decide before you feel adequately informed and prepared.

# CHAPTER 4: MANAGING SYMPTOMS AND SIDE EFFECTS

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Lung cancer and its treatments can lead to a range of symptoms and side effects. Understanding what is normal, what can be managed, and when to call your care team helps you maintain the best possible quality of life. Proactive symptom management is a key part of cancer care—your comfort and well-being matter just as much as treating the disease.

## FATIGUE

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects, affecting both body and mind. Unlike normal tiredness, cancer-related fatigue can feel sudden, persistent, and overwhelming. It may be influenced by anemia, treatment, sleep changes, or emotional stress. Simple strategies like prioritizing tasks, taking short naps, staying lightly active, and asking for help can make a significant difference.

## BREATHING DIFFICULTY

Breathing difficulties may arise from the tumor itself, fluid buildup, inflammation, or effects of treatment. Pulmonary rehabilitation programs teach breathing exercises that can help maintain lung function. Medications, oxygen therapy, or guided physical therapy may also be recommended.

## NAUSEA & APPETITE

Nausea and appetite changes can result from chemotherapy, radiation, medications, or stress. Anti-nausea medications are usually very effective, and nutritional support from a dietitian can help identify foods that are easier to tolerate. Small, frequent meals or nutrient-dense snacks may help maintain weight and energy levels.

## PAIN MANAGEMENT

Pain management is another important aspect of symptom control. Pain may come from the tumor pressing on surrounding organs or from treatment-related inflammation or nerve irritation. Your care team can offer pain medications, nerve blocks, or integrative therapies such as acupuncture or massage to help manage discomfort.

## INTEGRATIVE CARE

Integrative care—using safe complementary therapies alongside conventional medicine—can be very beneficial. Gentle exercise, mindfulness practices, yoga, and breathing techniques can help reduce stress, improve sleep, and enhance overall well-being. Always discuss complementary therapies with your doctor to confirm they do not interfere with your treatments.

## PALLIATIVE CARE

Palliative care is often misunderstood. It is not only for end-of-life care, but rather a specialized field focused on improving comfort, reducing symptoms, and supporting emotional well-being. Engaging palliative care specialists early in your treatment can significantly improve your quality of life.

## YOUR PATH FORWARD

Recognizing symptoms early and reporting them promptly allows your care team to intervene before issues become severe. You should never feel like you're "bothering" your care team—symptom management is a core part of their role, and open communication helps you get the support you need.

# CHAPTER 5: EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

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The emotional impact of a lung cancer diagnosis is profound. Patients and caregivers alike often navigate a complex range of feelings that can shift rapidly from day to day, or even hour to hour. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge these emotions is a vital step toward maintaining mental health and emotional balance.

## PROCESSING YOUR EMOTIONS

Shock and disbelief are common immediately after diagnosis. You may feel detached from the situation, as if you're watching someone else's life unfold. This is a normal protective response as your mind processes overwhelming information.

As time passes, feelings of fear and anxiety may emerge. Fear of the unknown, fear of treatment, fear of telling loved ones, and fear of the future can create emotional strain. Practices like journaling, deep breathing, meditation, or counseling can help you manage these feelings.

It's also common to experience anger, guilt, or frustration. Some people feel angry at themselves, at their bodies, or at circumstances beyond their control. Others feel guilt about lifestyle choices or worry about burdening loved ones. These feelings do not mean you're handling things poorly—they are a natural part of processing a major life event.

Talking openly with loved ones about your emotional experience can strengthen your support system. Sharing your fears, needs, and boundaries helps others understand how to best support you. But it's also okay if some conversations feel too heavy. Choosing when and how to share information is a personal decision.

## PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Professional support can make a tremendous difference. Oncology social workers, psychologists, or therapists who specialize in chronic illness can offer coping tools tailored to patients facing cancer. Support groups, whether in-person or virtual, connect you with others who truly understand what you're going through.

Taking care of your mental health also includes prioritizing activities that bring joy or calm—music, nature, reading, hobbies, or simple quiet moments. Maintaining a sense of identity outside of cancer helps you stay grounded and emotionally resilient. Even on difficult days, small moments of comfort can create meaningful stability.

# CHAPTER 6: LIFESTYLE ADJUSTMENTS AND SELF-CARE

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Lifestyle changes can play a supportive role in your overall treatment plan, but it's important to approach them gently and sustainably. You are not expected to overhaul your entire life overnight. Instead, focus on small adjustments that promote health, comfort, and emotional stability.

**Nutrition** is a cornerstone of supportive care. Eating well helps maintain strength, supports your immune system, and fuels your body through treatment. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains offers essential nutrients. However, during treatment, eating may become difficult. Working closely with a dietitian supports your nutritional needs in ways that feel manageable and individualized.

**Physical activity** can help reduce fatigue, improve mood, and support lung function. Light activities such as walking, gentle yoga, stretching, or pulmonary exercises may help maintain mobility and energy. Always discuss exercise plans with your care team to fit your current abilities and safety needs.

**Sleep** can also be affected by treatment, stress, or medication. Establishing a consistent bedtime routine, creating a calming sleep environment, and limiting stimulants like caffeine can improve sleep quality. If sleep disruptions become persistent, your care team can help identify underlying causes and recommend solutions.

**Stress management** plays a crucial role in your well-being. Techniques such as mindfulness meditation, guided imagery, art therapy, prayer, or grounding exercises can help calm the mind. Many cancer centers offer classes or workshops on relaxation techniques, gentle movement, or stress reduction.

**Smoking cessation**, if applicable, is an essential step. Even after a diagnosis, quitting smoking can dramatically improve treatment outcomes, lung function, and healing. Resources such as counseling, nicotine replacement, medications, and support groups can greatly increase the chances of long-term success.

Self-care also involves setting boundaries, saying no when needed, and adjusting routines to match your energy levels. Prioritizing activities that bring joy and reduce stress helps you maintain emotional resilience. This is not the time to push yourself beyond your limits—rest, nourishment, and compassion toward yourself are vital aspects of healing.

# CHAPTER 7: NAVIGATING PRACTICAL MATTERS

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In addition to the medical and emotional challenges of a lung cancer diagnosis, many patients face practical and financial concerns. Addressing these issues early can help reduce stress and provide you with the resources needed to focus on treatment and recovery.

## INSURANCE

Insurance can be confusing, but understanding your coverage is essential. Reviewing your policy, asking about deductibles and out-of-pocket costs, and speaking with hospital case managers can clarify what services are covered. Many hospitals have dedicated financial counselors who can help you create payment plans or explore assistance programs.

## BENEFITS

You may also be eligible for disability benefits or medical leave through state or federal programs. The Social Security Administration offers benefits for individuals who meet medical criteria, and many workplaces offer short-term or long-term disability coverage. A social worker or patient advocate can help you determine eligibility and assist with applications.

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Financial assistance programs may be available through nonprofit organizations, pharmaceutical companies, or local community groups. These programs can help with co-pays, transportation, lodging during treatment, or other out-of-pocket costs. Asking your care team about local resources can open doors to valuable support.

## DAILY LIFE

Work and daily routines may need adjustment. Many patients take medical leave, while others continue working with modified schedules or accommodations. Communicating openly with your employer, HR department, or supervisor can help you balance work responsibilities with treatment demands.

## PLANNING AHEAD

Legal documents such as advance directives, living wills, and medical proxies are important tools that honor your preferences for care. Completing these documents early does not mean you expect the worst; rather, it helps your voice remain central in your care. Hospitals often have staff available to help you complete these forms.

## CAREGIVING

For caregivers, practical support includes meal planning, coordinating rides, scheduling appointments, and managing medications. Creating shared calendars or using mobile apps can help distribute responsibilities among family members and reduce stress on the primary caregiver.

Managing practical matters may feel overwhelming at first, but taking them step by step—and seeking help from professional resources—can make a meaningful difference in your overall experience.

# CHAPTER 8: SUPPORTING YOUR LOVED ONES

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A cancer diagnosis affects the entire family, not just the patient. Loved ones may struggle with fear, worry, or uncertainty about how to provide support. Understanding the emotional and practical needs of caregivers helps strengthen relationships and creates a more nurturing support system.

Caregivers often take on significant responsibilities, from attending appointments to managing medications and assisting with daily tasks. This role can be physically and emotionally demanding. Caregiver burnout is real, and encouraging caregivers to take breaks, seek help, and care for their own health is important.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication within families is essential. Honest conversations about expectations, fears, and needs can help prevent misunderstandings and emotional strain. Sometimes families find it helpful to designate a single person to share updates with others, reducing the patient's burden of constant communication.

## SUPPORT

Loved ones may also experience their own emotional distress. They may worry about saying the wrong thing or feel helpless when they cannot "fix" the situation. Reassure them that simply being present—listening, offering comfort, and providing practical help—is often the most valuable support.

## YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

Friends and community members often want to help but may not know how. Providing specific suggestions, such as meal delivery, rides to appointments, childcare, or household chores, allows people to contribute in meaningful and manageable ways.

Support groups for caregivers can be invaluable. Sharing experiences with others facing similar challenges can offer validation, coping strategies, and community. Many cancer centers offer dedicated caregiver programs, workshops, or counseling resources.

Supporting loved ones through cancer is a shared journey—one that requires patience, communication, and compassion from everyone involved. Strengthening your support system not only benefits you but also helps your caregivers feel more confident and capable.

# CHAPTER 9: LIFE AFTER TREATMENT

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Completing treatment is a major milestone, but it also marks the beginning of a new phase of life. Many patients describe the post-treatment period as both hopeful and unexpectedly challenging. You may feel relieved that active treatment is over, but also uncertain about what comes next.

## SURVIVORSHIP PLANS

One of the most important components of post-treatment care is your survivorship plan. This individualized plan outlines follow-up exams, imaging schedules, symptom monitoring, and long-term health recommendations. Following this plan helps detect any changes early and provides structure during a period that may otherwise feel uncertain.

It's also normal to feel fear of recurrence. This fear may spike before scans, during anniversaries of your diagnosis, or when new symptoms arise. Over time, many survivors learn coping strategies such as mindfulness, counseling, or connecting with survivorship programs to manage anxiety and regain a sense of control.

## PHYSICAL RECOVERY

Physical recovery after treatment takes time. You may experience lingering fatigue, changes in lung function, altered appetite, or emotional fluctuations. Gradual changes in diet, exercise, and daily routines can help rebuild strength. Rehabilitation programs can also support physical recovery, especially after surgery or intensive treatment.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Returning to work or your regular responsibilities may require a phased approach. Some people feel ready to return quickly, while others need more time. Communicating with your employer or support system can help you make this transition at a pace that feels comfortable.

## EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Many survivors also describe shifts in identity and perspective. Cancer may change your priorities, relationships, or sense of purpose. While these changes can be challenging, they can also lead to renewed meaning in life. Reengaging with hobbies, travel, social events, or creative pursuits can help restore your sense of self.

Staying connected to support networks—even after treatment—can provide reassurance and emotional grounding. Many survivors continue attending support groups or individual counseling sessions as part of their long-term wellness plan.

Life after treatment is a journey of rebuilding—physically, emotionally, and socially. With patience, self-compassion, and support, many survivors find new strength and resilience in the years that follow.

# CHAPTER 10: FINDING STRENGTH AND PURPOSE

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Even in the most challenging moments, many people discover strength they didn't know they have. A lung cancer diagnosis can bring deep fear and uncertainty, but it can also reveal courage, resilience, and hope. Finding meaning in your experience does not mean ignoring the difficulty—it means honoring your journey and recognizing the power you carry within you.

## SUPPORT GROUPS

Stories of survival and hope from others can provide comfort and inspiration. Whether shared in support groups, online communities, or personal conversations, these stories remind you that healing—physical, emotional, and spiritual—is possible in many forms.

Many people find purpose by supporting others who are newly diagnosed. Offering a listening ear, sharing your experiences, or participating in advocacy efforts can be incredibly meaningful. Even small acts of kindness, like sharing resources or writing a message of encouragement, can make a profound difference.

## ADVOCACY

Advocacy opportunities also exist through national organizations, awareness campaigns, and fundraising events. Some survivors work to raise awareness about lung cancer, support research, or advocate for improved screening and treatment options. These efforts help others and create a sense of community and purpose.

Maintaining a positive outlook does not mean pretending everything is okay. It means recognizing your fears, acknowledging challenges, and still finding moments of gratitude. Positivity can be quiet and gentle—a warm conversation, a moment in nature, or a small accomplishment on a difficult day.

Your story matters. Your strength matters. No matter where you are in your journey—newly diagnosed, in treatment, or living in survivorship—you deserve support, understanding, and hope. You are not defined by your diagnosis; you are defined by your resilience, your courage, and the life you continue to build.

# GLOSSARY OF MEDICAL TERMS

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## ○ BIOPSY:

Removal of tissue for examination under a microscope.

## ○ METASTASIS:

Spread of cancer to another part of the body.

## ○ TUMOR MARKERS:

Substances produced by cancer cells used to guide treatment.

## ○ IMMUNOTHERAPY:

Treatment that boosts the immune system's ability to fight cancer.

## ○ TARGETED THERAPY:

Drugs that target specific genetic mutations in cancer cells.

## ○ ONCOLOGIST:

Doctor specializing in cancer treatment.

## ○ PULMONOLOGIST:

Doctor specializing in lung and respiratory conditions.

## ○ RADIOLOGIST:

Physician who interprets imaging tests.

## ○ CHEMOTHERAPY:

Medications that kill rapidly dividing cells.

## ○ PALLIATIVE CARE:

Specialized care focused on comfort and quality of life.