

Consumer health: Understanding metastatic brain cancer

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May is Brain Cancer Awareness Month, which makes this a good time to learn about metastatic brain cancer.

Overall, the chance that a person will develop a malignant tumor of the brain or [spinal cord](#) in their lifetime is less than 1%, according to the American Cancer Society. Nevertheless, nearly 19,000 people in the U.S. will die from brain and spinal cord tumors in 2023.

A brain tumor is a growth of cells in the brain or near it, including in nerves, the [pituitary gland](#), the pineal gland and the membranes that cover the surface of the brain.

Brain tumors that begin in or near the brain are called primary [brain tumors](#). Sometimes, cancer spreads to the brain from other parts of the body. These tumors are secondary brain tumors, or metastatic brain tumors.

Any cancer can spread, or metastasize, to the brain, but the types most likely to cause brain metastases are lung, breast, colon, kidney and melanoma.

Brain metastases may form one tumor or many tumors in the brain. As the metastatic brain tumors grow, they create pressure on and change the function of surrounding brain tissue. This causes signs and symptoms, such as headache, personality changes, memory loss and seizures.

Treatment for brain metastases can help ease symptoms, slow tumor growth and extend life. Even with successful treatment, brain metastases often recur, so your health care team will recommend close follow-up after treatment.

Treatment options for people with brain metastases often include medication, surgery, stereotactic radiosurgery, whole-brain radiation therapy or some combination of these. In certain situations, your treatment team may consider drug treatments for [brain metastases](#). Because brain tumors can develop in parts of the brain that control

motor skills, speech, vision and thinking, rehabilitation may be a necessary part of recovery.

The best treatment plan for you will depend on the type, size, number and location of the tumors, as well as your signs and symptoms, overall health, and preferences. Talk with your health care team about your goals for [treatment](#).

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