

Soft tissue cancers

Soft tissue cancer, also called soft tissue sarcoma, is a rare form of cancer.

This cancer can start and grow in any soft tissue area of the body. This cancer grows in soft tissue such as fat, muscles, nerves, blood vessels and tissue that connects and surrounds joints.

There are about 50 types of soft tissue cancers and each one is different from the other. The symptoms, diagnosis and treatment for soft tissue cancer will vary according to:

- Disease type
- Where in the body it is and
- When it started

Usually there are no symptoms at the early stages of soft tissue cancer. The first sign you notice may be a small, painless lump. Over time, as this lump grows, it may become painful or sore. This will depend on where in the body the cancer is.

Most people who show signs of a small and/or painful lump do **not** have soft tissue cancer.

Only a doctor can tell if you have soft tissue cancer. If you have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks, you should see your GP (local family doctor).

Your first tests for diagnosis

Placing you at the centre of our work, your specialist will determine where your cancer started (what type of cell) and what type of soft tissue cancer it is.

To determine your condition, our experts will work with you and support you through a medical examination and other key tests such as:

- Pathology (blood tests)
- Imaging (scans and x-rays)
- Biopsy.

Diagnosis

As the largest bone and soft tissue sarcoma service in Australia, we are dedicated to providing you with the best testing and treatment for soft tissue cancer

We will design and work to a diagnosis and treatment plan that best responds to your condition and individual needs.

Sarcomas are very complex and can grow in many places of the body. To provide you with the best treatment plan we need to make sure we diagnose the right type of soft tissue sarcoma.

To do this we will first conduct various imaging tests to show the size and place of the cancer.

Imaging tests may include:

- X-rays – to look at the overall structure and position of the tumour and to see if the tumour is coming from the bone or affecting the bone
- MRI is a specialised scan that allows the specialist to see through the bone and soft tissue. MRI is good for precisely locating exactly where the tumour is. Surgeons rely on MRI to accurately plan where and how they perform surgery to give the best results. This will be done first to show the exact size and place of the tumour.
- Thallium or PET scan – look at how active the tumour is. These scans give your specialist information about how aggressive your tumour is.
- CT scans – provide more information than a normal x-ray. Are used to scan the chest where sarcomas may spread.
- Bone biopsy - is a small sample of cells from the affected bone area. The biopsy is done after all other investigations. The biopsy is usually performed under CT guidance. The biopsy sample will be tested by the pathologist to determine the exact nature of the tumour.

Following the scans, we will perform a biopsy. A biopsy is vital to diagnose the right condition. A biopsy can be:

- A simple guided needle biopsy to aspirate (remove) some cells from the affected area
- A larger biopsy where a small piece of tissue is removed for laboratory testing. Testing the sample will show if cancer cells are present as well as help to pinpoint the exact type of sarcoma disease.

Focusing on you (treatment)

Your doctor will discuss and develop the best treatment plan for you. Treatments will depend on your diagnosis.

Soft tissue cancer treatment will depend on:

- the type of disease it is
- whether it has spread and how far (its stage)
- your general health and wellbeing
- Your needs

For most types of soft tissue cancer, **surgery** is the main treatment. It is used to remove the cancer, surrounding tissue and/or other infected areas such as lymph nodes.

Additional treatments to surgery may involve:

- Radiation therapy (strong and powerful beams of radiation/energy to kill and/or slow cancer cells) either before or after surgery or both.
- Chemotherapy (anti-cancer drugs) to help shrink the cancer cells before surgery or to destroy the cancer cells after surgery.

Enhancing your care (after treatment)

After effective treatment, patients will continue to see their specialist every three months. These visits are used to monitor your health and may include tests such as pathology, imaging (scans and x-rays) and biopsies. Your specialist will discuss the best follow-up plan for you.

Living with cancer

We know how hard cancer and treatment can be. Your lifestyle and that of your loved one's will be disrupted and changed. During this time, it is common to struggle with ongoing concerns about cancer and therapy. There are many expert groups available to support you through this time, including:

- [Australia and New Zealand Sarcoma Association](#)

- Cancer Council Australia
- Cancer Council Victoria

Support

We focus on all aspects of your health and wellbeing. Our sarcoma experts will help support and guide you to the best information and managed care.

Our specialist nurses can refer you to our:

- allied health services
- support services
- patient information resources
- Support groups.

Patient and carer resources

For more information about soft tissue cancers, their treatment and support for patients and families, download copies of the following resources:

- Soft Tissue Sarcoma: A fact sheet for people with cancer, their families and friends