

Secondary cancer in the brain



This Information Sheet is about cancer that has spread from the part of the body where it started, called the primary site, to the brain. Words in the text that are **bold** are explained in the glossary at the end of this information sheet.

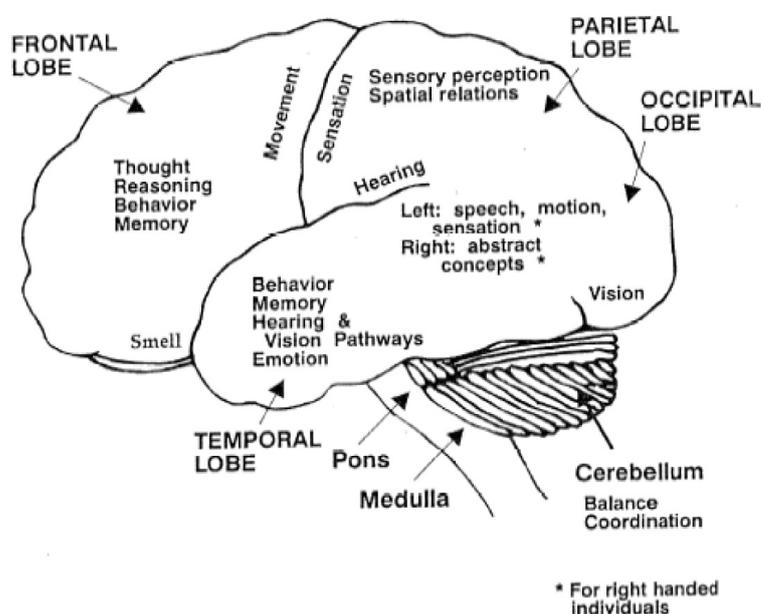
Secondary cancer in the brain occurs when cancer cells spread from the original cancer through the blood stream or lymphatic system and settle in the brain.

This type of spread is called metastasis, secondary cancer or secondaries. It is not the same as having primary brain cancer.

The most likely types of cancers to spread to the brain are lung, breast, bowel, kidney cancer and melanoma.

Each area of the brain controls different parts of the body and our behaviour. The symptoms experienced by the patient are caused by where the tumour is in the brain.

The functions of the lobes of the brain



Source: American Brain Tumor Association 2009

Symptoms of a secondary brain tumour

- headache
- weakness in areas of the body
- changes in behaviour
- fits (seizures).

Some of the symptoms for a secondary brain tumour are similar to those for a primary brain tumour.

Raised pressure in the brain can cause:

- nausea and vomiting
- confusion
- listlessness.

How secondary cancer in the brain is diagnosed

- physical examination
- neurological examination – to test your reflexes, muscle strength, coordination and sensation.
- eye examination – the doctor uses an instrument called an ophthalmoscope to check for swelling of the nerve at the back of the eye, which can be caused by a tumour in the brain.
- **CT Scan**
- **MRI Scan**
- biopsy – a sample of cells from the tumour.
- **PET Scan.**

How secondary cancer in the brain is treated

Steroids – can be given to help relieve symptoms. They can improve headaches, limb weakness and nausea.

Radiation treatment – given to relieve symptoms and may be combined with chemotherapy.

For some types of cancer that have spread to the brain, for example, breast cancer, hormonal or immunotherapy may be offered.

Surgery (usually is only possible when one secondary is present).

In addition, expert symptom management, often using a combination of drugs and supportive therapies, such as relaxation and massage, will be helpful. You may be referred to a palliative care service.

Helpful resources for more information

The Cancer Society offers a range of support and information services to assist those diagnosed with secondary cancer in the brain. Phone the Cancer Information Helpline on 0800 CANCER (226 237) and speak to our cancer information nurses. The Cancer Society will also provide you with free booklets – *Advanced Cancer/Matepukupuku Maukaha* and *Living with Cancer-Related Breathlessness* (has accompanying CD).

Suggested reading and websites

Cancer Society libraries have these books to borrow. Phone 0800 CANCER (226 237) to request them.

Reading

- American Cancer Society. *QuickFacts. Advanced Cancer*. USA: American Cancer Society, 2008.
- Holland, Jimmie, and Lewis, Sheldon. *The Human Side of Cancer: Living with hope, coping with*

uncertainty. USA: HarperCollins, 2000.

- Lynn, Joanne, and Harrold, Joan. *Handbook for Mortals: Guidance for people living with serious illness*. USA: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Moore, Thomas. *Care of the Soul: A guide for celebrating depth and sacredness in everyday life*. USA: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- Shinoda Bolen, Jean. *Close to the Bone: Life-threatening illness and the search for meaning*. USA: Touchstone Books, 1998.

Websites

- CancerBackup UK – coping with advanced cancer: www.cancerbackup.org.uk/ResourceSupport/Advancedcancer/Copingwithadvancedcancer
- CancerBackup UK – secondary brain cancer: www.cancerbackup.org.uk/Cancertype/Brainsecondary/
- National Cancer Institute – when cancer returns: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/When-Cancer>Returns
- Palliative Care Australia – “Asking Questions can Help” – an online booklet for patients and families – to view this click ‘publications’ to link to the booklet: www.pallcare.org.au
- Skylight – Skylight helps children and young people deal with change, loss and grief: www.skylight.org.nz

Glossary

CT scan – the initials CT stand for **computerised tomography**. CT scanners produce a specialised type of X-ray, which builds up a three-dimensional picture of the inside of the body.

MRI scan – a scan that uses radio waves and a powerful magnet to create images. The process is slower than a CT scan and is quite noisy.

PET scan – the initials PET stand for **positron emission tomography**. The test involves having an injection of a glucose (sugar) solution containing a tiny dose of radioactive material. Using the signals from this radioactive injection, a scanning machine can build up a picture of the part of the body.