Radiation Therapy – What is cancer?

The human body is made up of billions of cells. Groups of cells perform a specific function. Normal cells die and are replaced in an orderly fashion. This results in an appropriate number of cells, organized and working properly to perform a specific function.

Occasionally however, cells are replaced in an uncontrolled way and may lack the organization needed for normal function. Abnormal growth of cells is called a mass or tumor. There are two kinds of tumors: benign (non-cancerous) and malignant (cancer).

Because of their larger size, all masses or tumors can grow into normal, healthy areas or squeeze nearby tissues and organs. This can cause pain and interfere with normal function.

Cancerous tumors attack nearby cells and destroy them. Cancer cells can also get into body fluids which allow the cells to spread to other parts of the body. This process is called metastasis.

The body fluids that can carry cancer cells are the blood and the lymph. Lymph is a nearly clear fluid that drains waste from cells. This fluid travels through vessels and small, bean-shaped structures called lymph nodes. One function of the lymph nodes is to filter unwanted substances, like bacteria or cancer cells, out of the fluid. However, if there are too many cancer cells, the nodes cannot remove all of them and the cancer spreads.

There are more than 100 different types of cancer and they all behave differently. Even the same type of cancer may behave differently in different people.

Your care must be individualized. If your friend or neighbor got one kind of treatment or had a side effect, does not mean your experience will be the same, even if you have the same kind of cancer.

There are three main methods for treating cancer: surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy. You may get one, two, or all three of these treatments in any combination. Your treatment is based on many factors – patient or doctor choice, type of cancer, how far the cancer has spread and how the cancer behaves. Please ask any questions you have about your treatment. It is important that you understand why a treatment has been chosen for you.