

BRAIN TUMOURS

A brain tumour is a growth of cells in the brain that multiplies in an abnormal, uncontrollable way. It can either be cancerous (malignant) or non-cancerous (benign).

Brain tumours are graded from 1 to 4 according to their behaviour, such as how fast they grow and how likely they are to grow back after treatment.

- Benign brain tumours are low grade (grade 1 or 2), which means they grow slowly and are less likely to return after treatment.
- Malignant brain tumours are high grade (grade 3 or 4) and either start in the brain (primary tumours) or spread into the brain from elsewhere (secondary tumours); they're more likely to grow back after treatment.

SYMPTOMS OF A BRAIN TUMOUR

The symptoms of a brain tumour vary depending on the exact part of the brain that's affected. Common symptoms include:

- severe, persistent headaches
- seizures (fits)
- persistent nausea, vomiting and drowsiness
- mental or behavioural changes, such as memory problems or changes in personality
- progressive weakness or paralysis on one side of the body, vision problems, or speech problems

Sometimes, you may not have any symptoms to begin with or they may only develop very slowly over time.

WHEN TO SEE YOUR GP

See your GP if you have persistent symptoms of a brain tumour. While it's unlikely to be a tumour, it's best to be sure by getting a proper diagnosis.

If your GP is unable to identify a more likely cause of your symptoms, they may refer you to a neurologist for further assessment and tests, such as a brain scan.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

Brain tumours can affect people of any age, including children, although they tend to be more common in older adults.

More than 9,000 people are diagnosed with primary brain tumours in the UK each year, of which about half are benign and half are malignant. Many others are diagnosed with secondary brain tumours.

The exact reason why some people develop primary brain tumours is unknown, but it's thought that certain genetic conditions such as neurofibromatosis type 1 and tuberous sclerosis and previous radiotherapy to the head increase your risk.

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TREATMENT AND OUTLOOK

The main treatment for most brain tumours is surgery, which aims to remove as much of the abnormal tissue as possible.

It's not always possible to remove the entire tumour, so further treatment with radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy may be necessary to kill any abnormal cells left behind.

For most benign tumours, treatment is often successful and a full recovery is possible, although there's sometimes a small chance the tumour could come back. Regular follow-up appointments will normally be recommended to monitor this.

The outlook for malignant tumours is generally less good, although this varies depending on things such as where the tumour is in the brain, your age, and your general health. Unfortunately, a cure is often not possible and most tumours will return after treatment.

If a tumour does come back, treatment will aim to relieve your symptoms and prolong life by controlling the growth of the tumour.

SUPPORT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

As well as reading the separate pages on benign brain tumours and malignant brain tumours, you may find the following websites useful sources of information and support:

- The Brain Tumour Charity
- Brain Tumour Research
- HeadSmart: be brain tumour aware
- Cancer Research UK: brain tumours
- Macmillan: brain tumours

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

CANCER RESEARCH UK
Angel Building, 407 St John Street, London, EC1V 4AD
Tel : 0808 800 40 40
www.cancerresearchuk.org

MACMILLAN CANCER SUPPORT
89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7UQ
Tel : 0808 808 00 00
www.macmillan.org.uk