

## Radiation Medicine Department

# Vulvar Cancer: Overview

### Overview

The vulva involves the outer part of the female vagina. Vulvar Cancer is rare, accounting for about 3% of all gynecologic cancers. Once usually found in women over the age of 50, it is becoming more common in women under 40.

Treatment choice and prognosis depend on the stage of the cancer and your general health.

### Symptoms

Vulvar cancer begins as a surface cancer. You may notice the following:

- A lump or sore at the opening of the vagina.
- Scaly, patchy, thickened, white – appearing skin
- A discharge from the lesion, which may cause itching
- Bleeding, severe burning, itching or pain in the vulva

### Diagnosis

The diagnosis of vulvar cancer is made by taking a biopsy (a small sample of tissue) that is examined under a microscope. You will be given local medication to numb the area before the biopsy.

### Staging

Once cancer of the vulva is diagnosed, more tests will be done to find out if the cancer has spread from the vulva to other parts of the body (staging). Your doctor needs to know the stage of the disease to plan treatment.

The following stages are used for cancer of the vulva:

- **Stage 0** or carcinoma in situ is a very early cancer. The cancer is found in the vulva only and is only in the surface of the skin.
- **Stage I** Cancer is found only in the vulva and/or the space between the opening of the rectum and the vagina (perineum). The tumor is 2 centimeters (about 1 inch) or less in size.
- **Stage II** Cancer is found in the vulva and/or the space between the opening of the rectum and the vagina (perineum), and the tumor is larger than 2 centimeters (larger than 1 inch).

- **Stage III** Cancer is found in the vulva and/or perineum and has spread to nearby tissues such as the lower part of the urethra (the tube through which urine passes), the vagina, the anus (the opening of the rectum), and/or has spread to nearby lymph nodes. (Lymph nodes are small bean-shaped structures that are found throughout the body. They produce and store infection-fighting cells.)
- **Stage IV** Cancer has spread beyond the urethra, vagina, and anus into the lining of the bladder (the sac that holds urine) and the bowel (intestine); or, it may have spread to the lymph nodes in the pelvis or to other parts of the body.
- **Recurrent disease** means that the cancer has come back (recurred) after it has been treated. It may come back in the vulva or another location.