



Cancer 101 FAQ: I was told I have lung cancer, but it went to my spine, so do I also have bone cancer?

No, but this is a very common misinterpretation.

Cancer is categorized by the cell type from which a cancer developed. The place where cancer begins is called the *primary* cancer. Cancer can spread via the bloodstream (metastasize) to other parts of the body and grow in these other areas. Typical areas for a cancer to metastasize to include the liver, the lungs, the bones, the brain, and the adrenal glands (on top of the kidneys) — but different types of primary cancers have a greater or lesser tendency to spread to particular parts of the body. Colon cancer tends to spread to the liver, while prostate cancer classically spreads to the skeleton. Lung cancer can spread to all of these places.

Some of the pattern of metastatic spread is related to the pattern of blood flow from the primary cancer, but there are also proteins on the surface of certain types of cancer cells (called adhesion molecules), as well as other factors that we don't fully understand, that lead certain cancers to preferentially grow in one area but not another.

So overall, it is important to distinguish, for instance, between a primary cancer in the brain, liver, bone, or adrenal glands (as cancers can arise directly from these areas) and secondary spread of a cancer from another area to these areas, which is more common. The best systemic therapy for these is typically related to the cellular origin of the primary cancer.

In addition, certain “local” complications from metastatic spread are treated in a similar way no matter what the primary cancer is. For instance, brain metastases are most commonly treated with radiation, and bone lesions are often treated with radiation if they are causing significant pain, with a medication like zoledronate (a bisphosphonate) added to reduce the risk of future skeletal complications.

For further discussion:

[Introduction to Lung Cancer, including discussion of “What is Cancer?”](#)

[General Work-Up and Staging of Lung Cancer](#)

Discussion of various treatments of metastatic spread is covered in separate dedicated posts on these subjects.

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