TNM Classification

Clarification of Number of Regional Lymph Nodes for pN0

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It has come to our attention that what was intended to be a guideline in the application of TNM has been misinterpreted by some to be a requirement. In the 1997 TNM classification, of both the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC)¹ and the International Union Against Cancer (UICC),² a statement appears for most sites of the body as follows:

pN0  Histologic examination of a regional lymphadenectomy specimen will ordinarily include 12 (for colorectal carcinoma) or more lymph nodes.

This statement was not intended to be a requirement for pN0, but rather a guideline. In fact, the TNM Supplement 1993³ notes for all tumor sites, “If the examined lymph nodes are negative, but the number ordinarily resected is not met, classify as pN0.” Authors who interpreted this as a requirement for pN0 have considered patients with fewer examined negative nodes as unclassifiable (pNX).⁴

This communication is intended to alert TNM users so that similar cases need not be excluded from analysis. We will make this guideline more explicit in the next edition of TNM.

Questions regarding TNM classification can be addressed to the TNM helpdesk at http://tnm.uicc.org or to the AJCC Inquiry and Response System at www.cancerstaging.org

REFERENCES