
Follicular Carcinoma

Thyroid pathology: molecular context, invasive morphology and clinical correlation

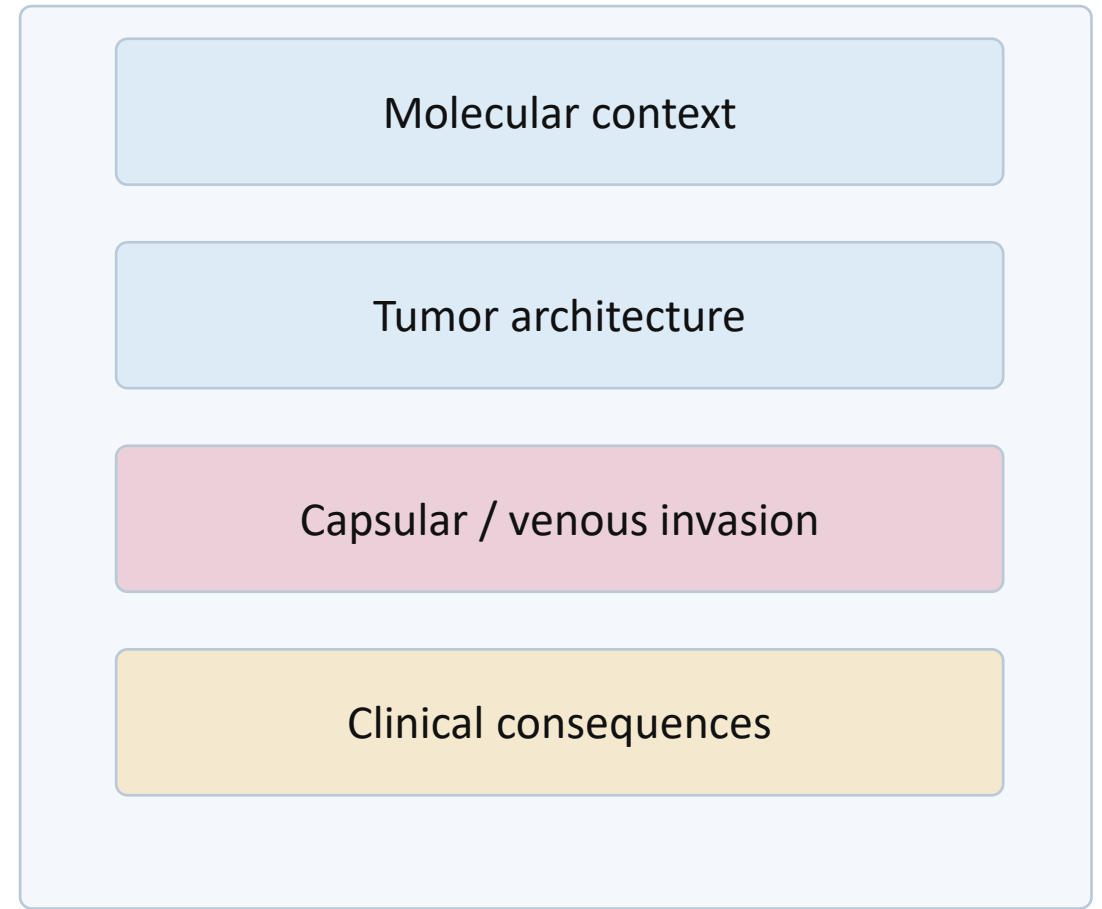
Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraihsakhri.com

Learning outcomes

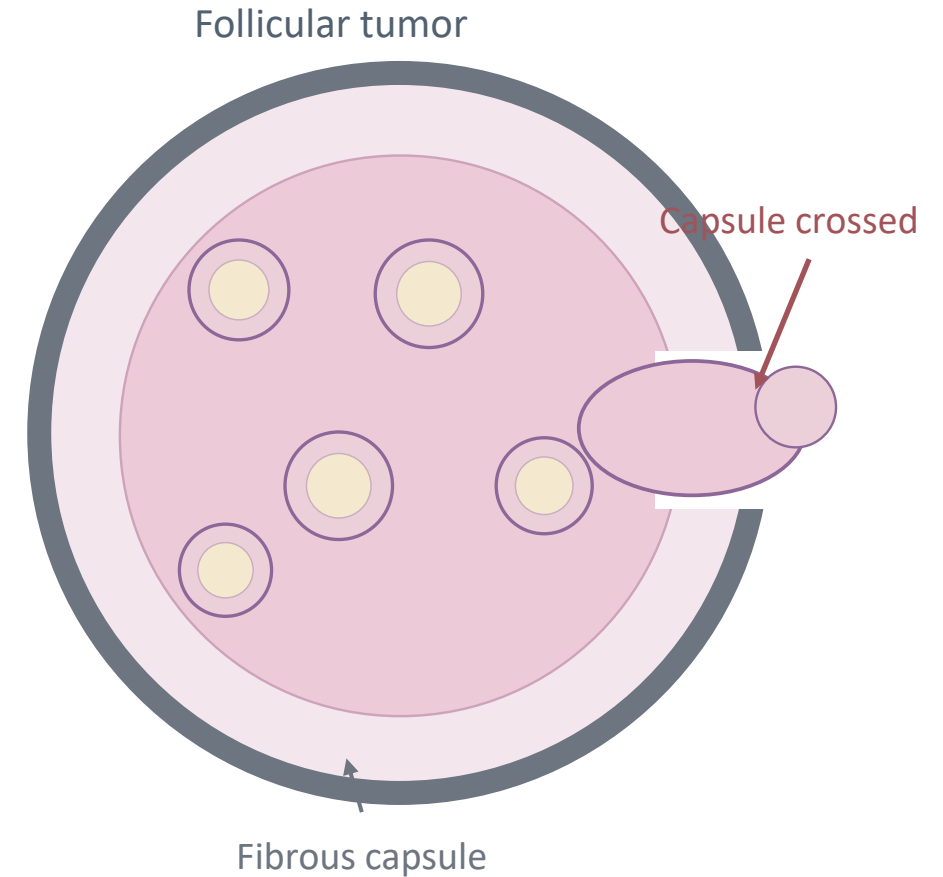
- Explain the morphologic basis for diagnosing follicular carcinoma.
- Relate RAS-pathway alterations to follicular differentiation.
- Distinguish follicular carcinoma from adenoma and follicular-patterned PTC.
- Connect vascular invasion to spread, prognosis, and follow-up.



Schematic

The decisive distinction is invasion

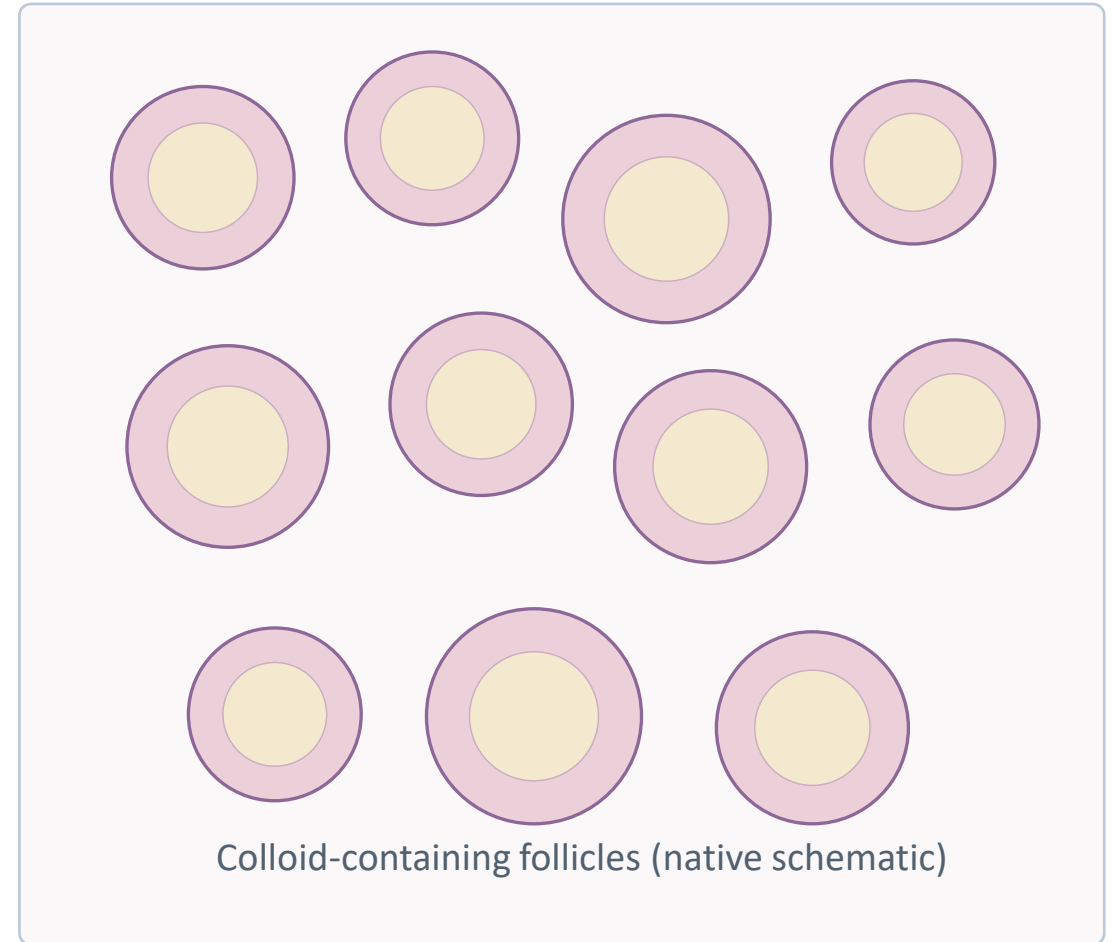
- Follicular carcinoma may closely resemble a benign follicular adenoma.
- The malignant diagnosis requires capsular and/or vascular invasion.
- Cytologic blandness and follicular formation do not exclude carcinoma.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

A follicular-cell–derived malignancy

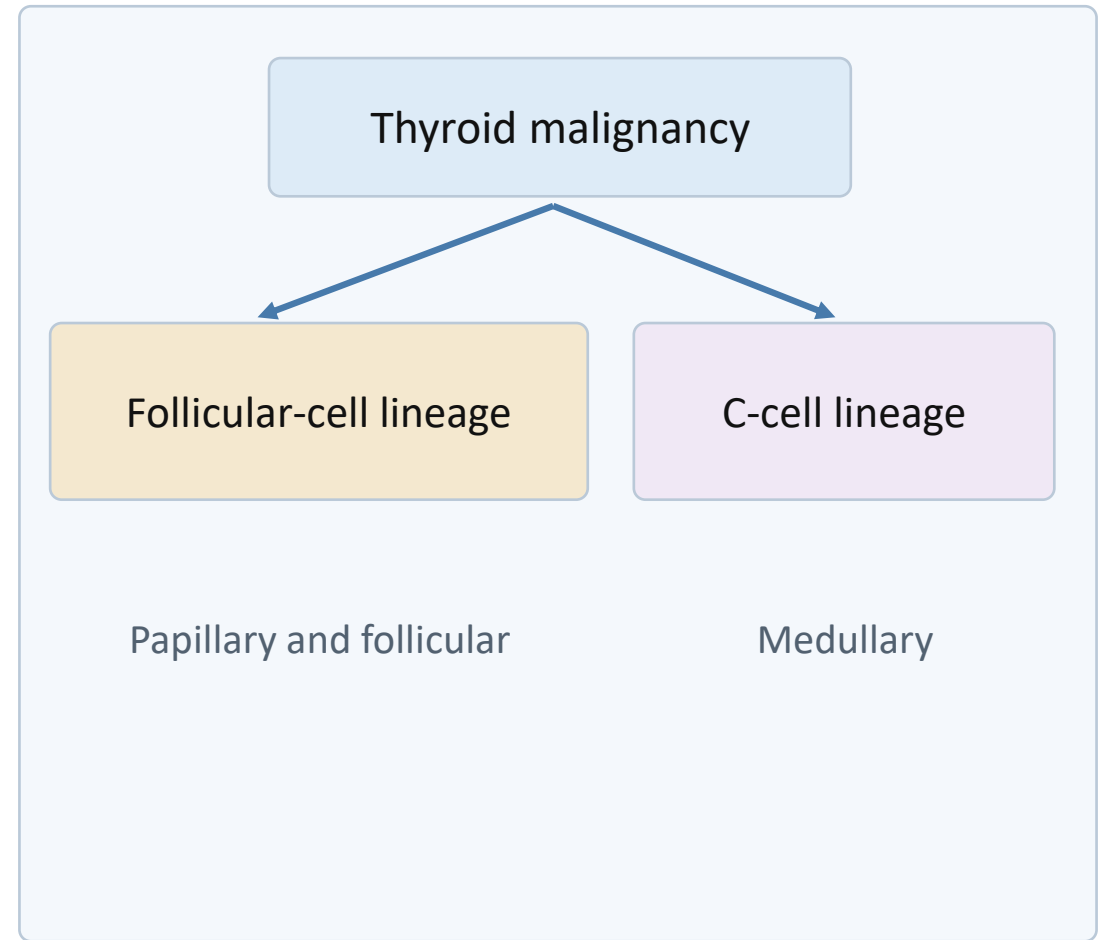
- Follicular carcinoma arises from thyroid follicular epithelial cells.
- It is generally a well-differentiated thyroid malignancy.
- Tumor cells often retain follicles and colloid production.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

Position among major thyroid cancers

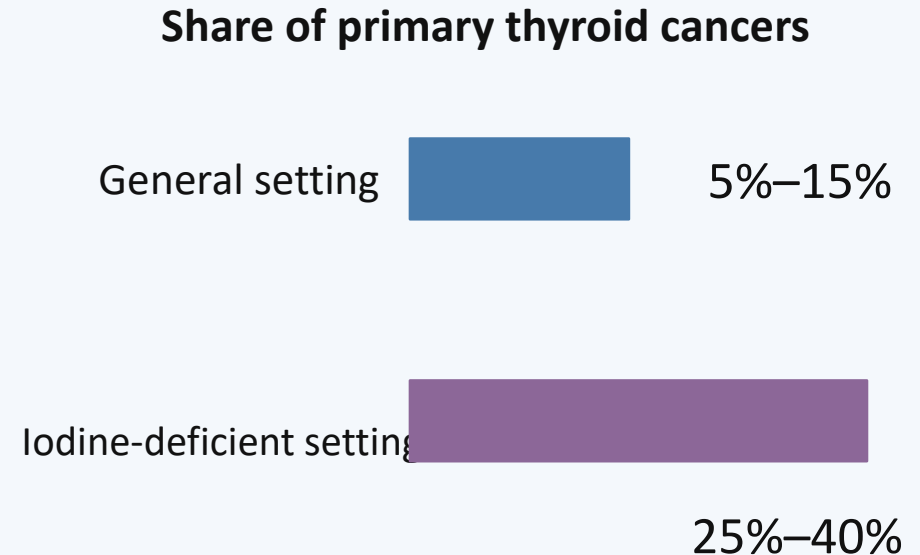
- Papillary carcinoma is the predominant follicular-cell–derived thyroid cancer.
- Follicular carcinoma represents a smaller but important subset.
- Medullary carcinoma originates from parafollicular C cells—not follicular cells.



Schematic

Frequency varies with iodine nutrition

- Follicular carcinoma accounts for 5%–15% of primary thyroid cancers.
- In iodine-deficient settings, it may account for 25%–40%.
- These percentages describe different populations, not competing estimates.



Bars are illustrative; Labels give source-reported ranges

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Age at presentation

- Follicular carcinoma generally presents later than papillary carcinoma.
- Peak incidence in the source is 40–60 years.
- Age is a clinical context clue, not a diagnostic criterion.

Peak occurrence

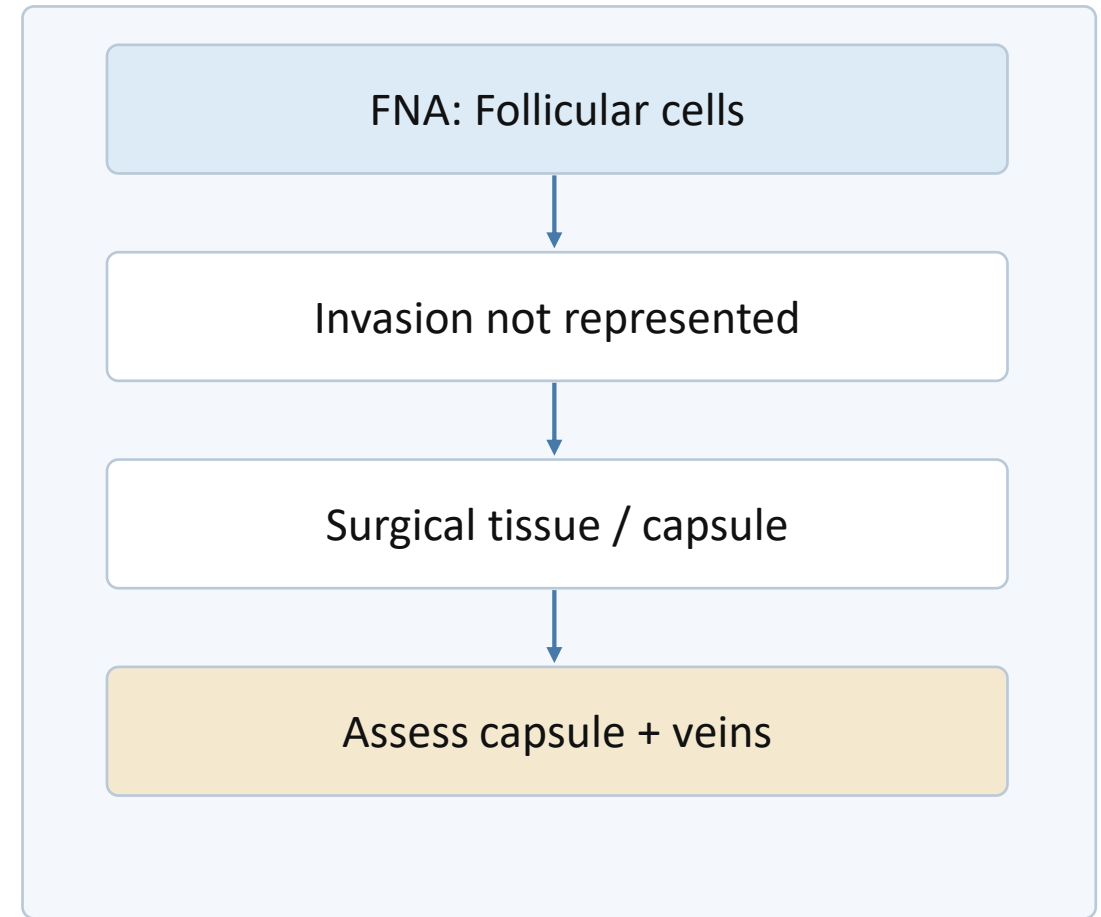
40–60 years

Age profile differs from papillary carcinoma

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Iodine deficiency: Population association

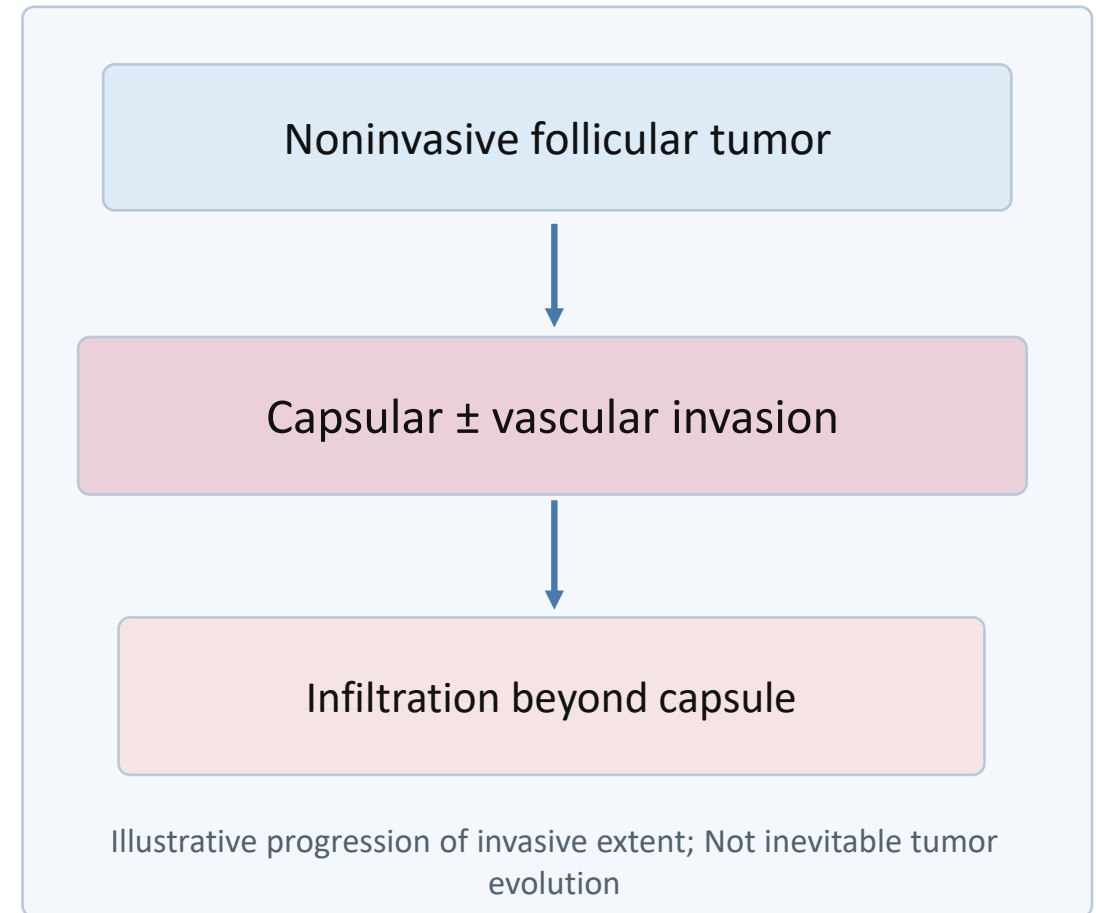
- Dietary iodine deficiency and associated goiter correlate with more follicular neoplasms.
- The association is epidemiologic; An individual nodule still requires morphologic diagnosis.
- Do not infer histologic malignancy solely from geographic exposure.



Schematic

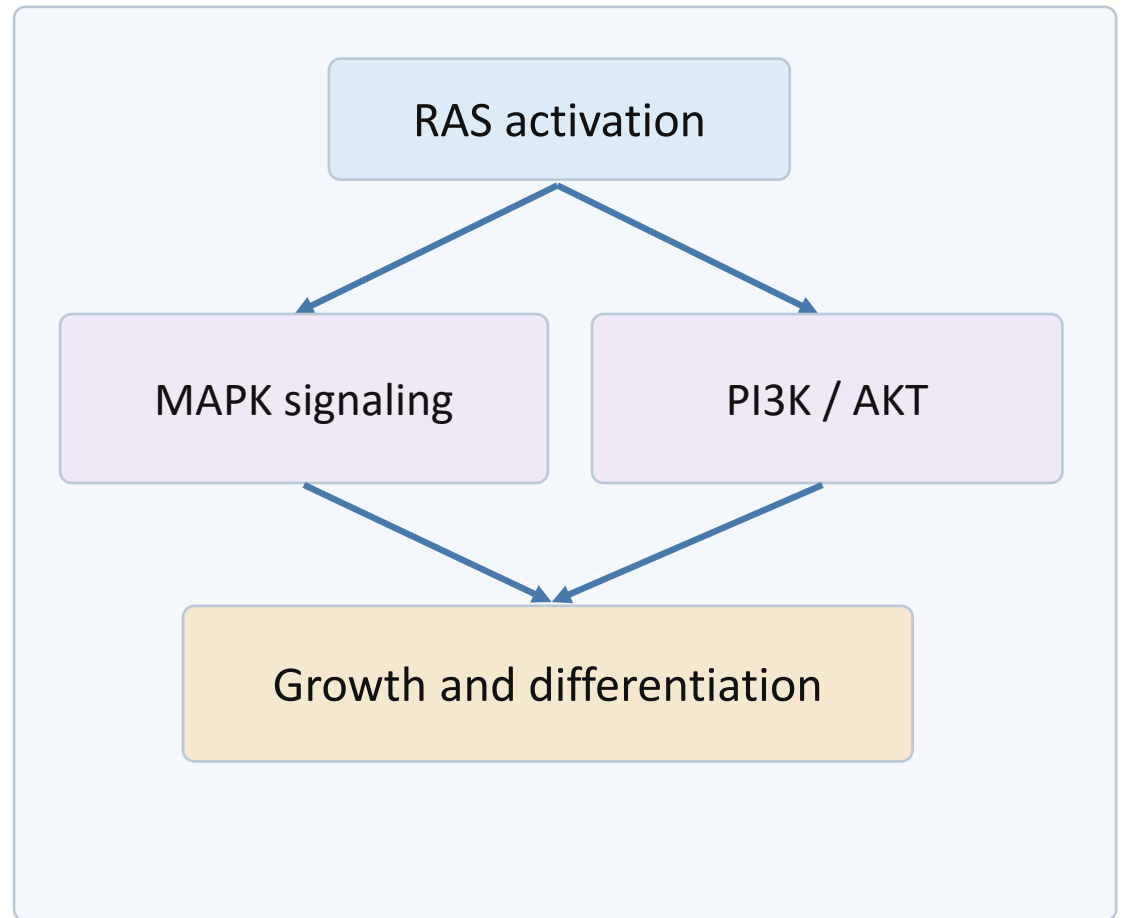
The relevant follicular-neoplasm spectrum

- Follicular adenoma is benign despite a clonal follicular proliferation.
- Follicular carcinoma may show the same architecture but invades capsule and/or vessels.
- Follicular-patterned lesions with papillary-type nuclei require a separate classification pathway.



Molecular drivers: Signaling pathways

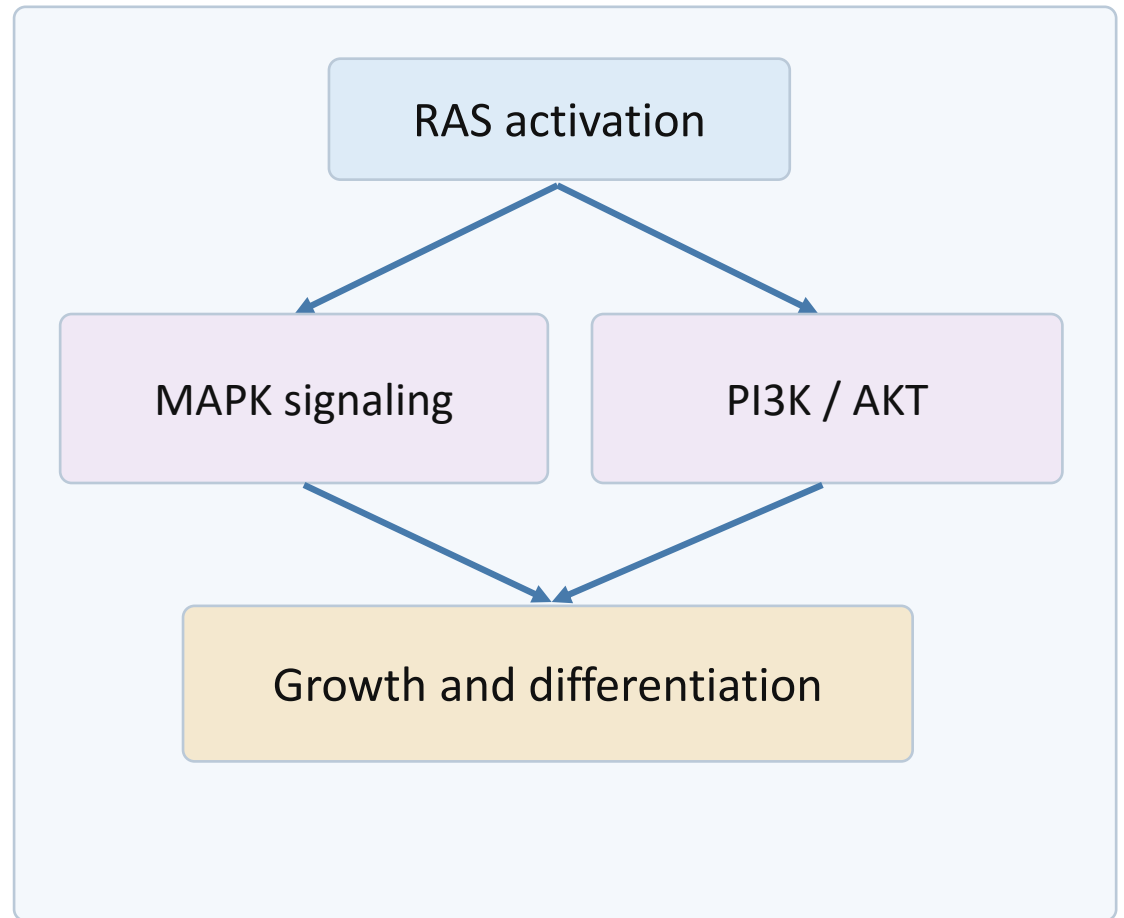
- Follicular-derived thyroid tumors often alter growth signaling pathways.
- Follicular neoplasms particularly involve RAS-associated signaling.
- Molecular alterations help explain biology but do not replace invasion assessment.



Schematic—simplified pathway relationships

RAS mutations in follicular neoplasms

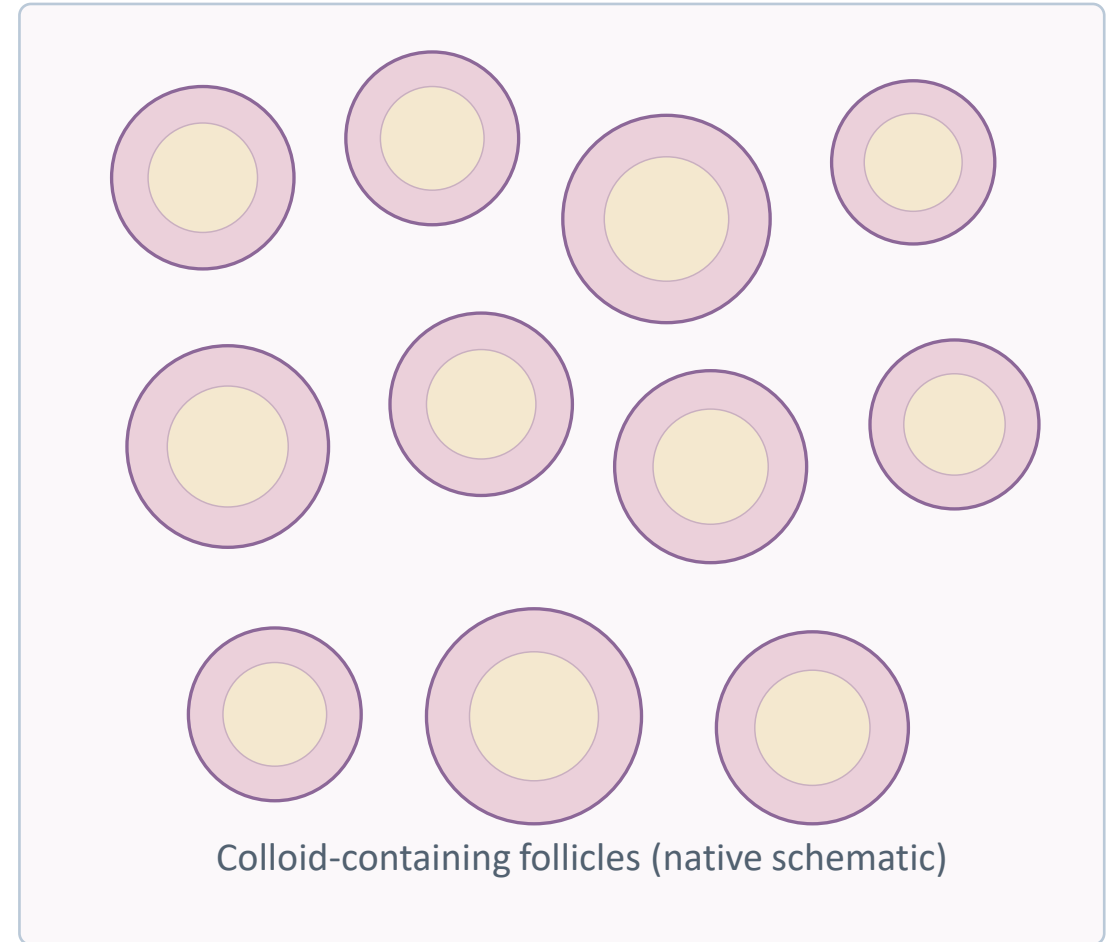
- Gain-of-function RAS alterations occur in follicular adenomas and carcinomas.
- RAS mutations occur in up to 50% of these lesions overall.
- Shared driver mutations limit their specificity for a benign-versus-malignant distinction.



Schematic—simplified pathway relationships

RAS-associated differentiated phenotype

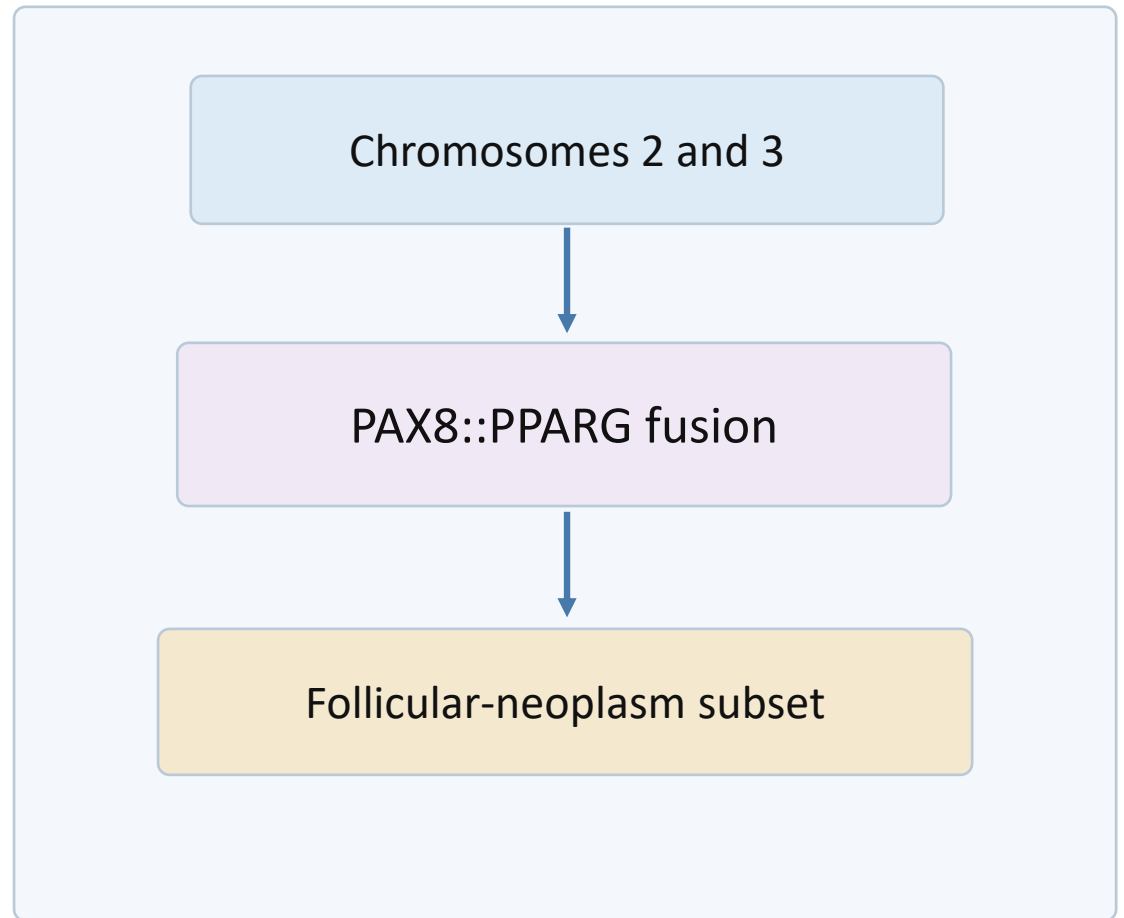
- RAS-mutated follicular neoplasms retain thyroid differentiation markers.
- Examples include thyroglobulin and thyroid peroxidase.
- Retention may contribute to histology that resembles normal follicles.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

PAX8::PPARG fusion

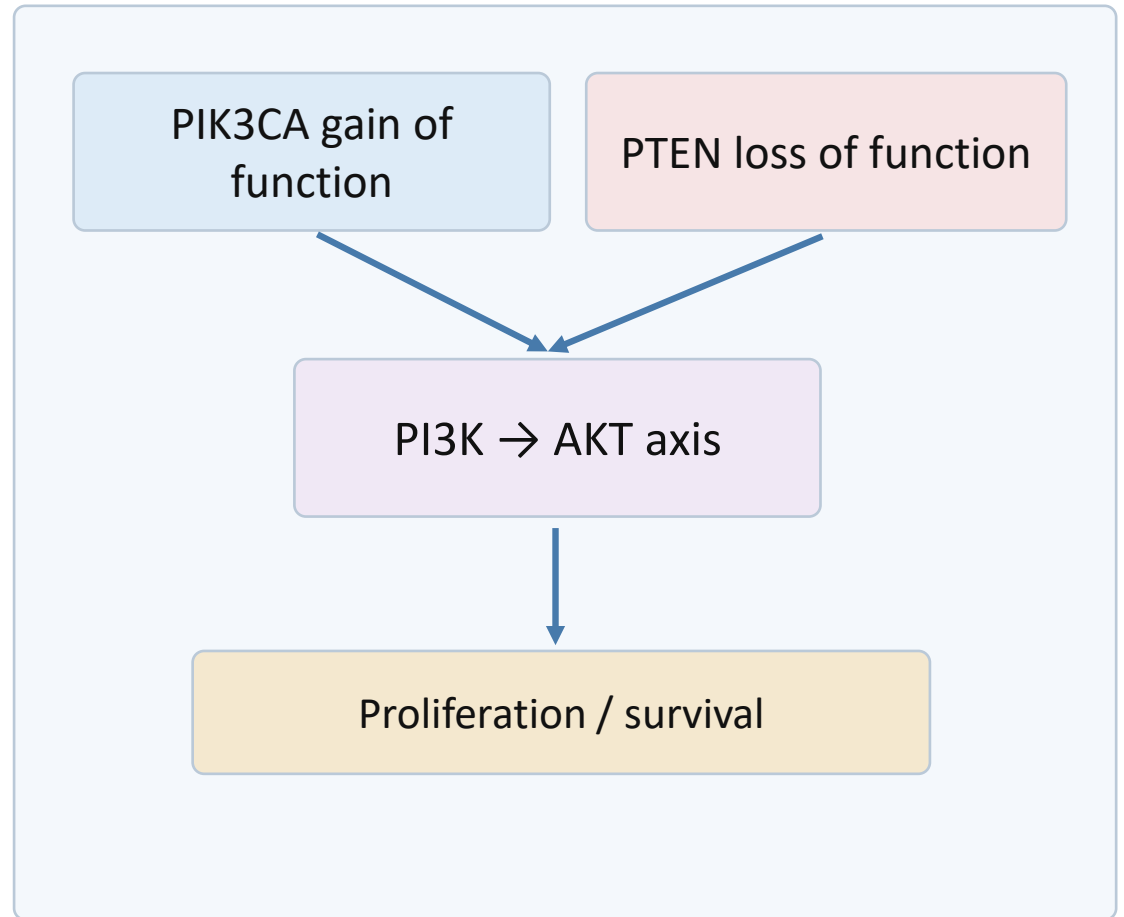
- A subset of follicular neoplasms has t(2;3)(q13;p25).
- The rearrangement joins PAX8 and PPARG gene regions.
- PAX8 relates to thyroid development; PPARG encodes a nuclear hormone receptor.



Schematic—simplified pathway relationships

PI3K-pathway alterations

- Up to 10% of follicular carcinomas harbor PIK3CA activation or PTEN loss.
- PTEN is a negative regulator of PI3K-pathway signaling.
- Changes in this axis favor proliferative and survival signaling.



Schematic—simplified pathway relationships

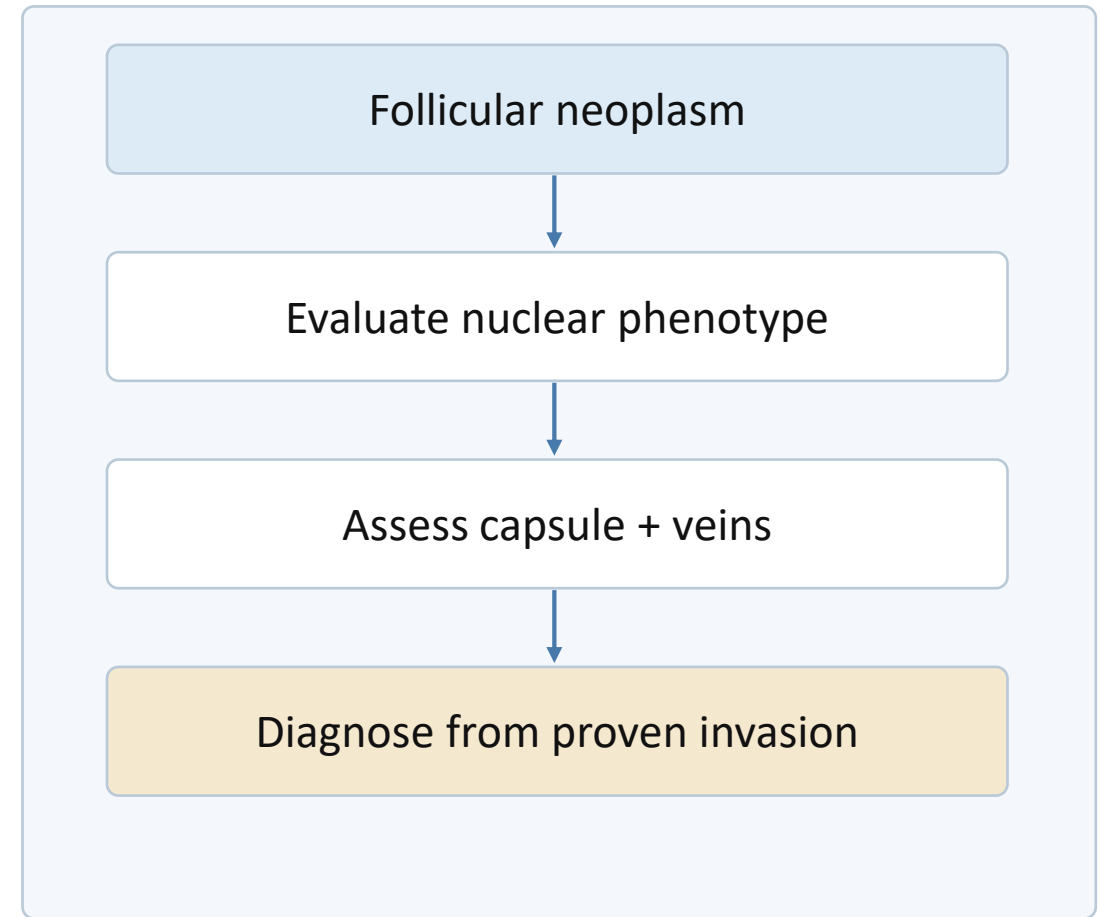
Genetic overlap with follicular adenoma

Finding	Adenoma	Carcinoma
Follicular architecture	Often	Often
RAS alteration	Possible	Possible
PAX8::PPARG fusion	Subset	Subset
Capsular / vascular invasion	Absent	Present

- RAS and PAX8::PPARG alterations occur in follicular neoplasms, not solely carcinomas.
- Follicular adenomas generally are not regarded as obligatory carcinoma precursors.
- A subset may share a biological lineage; This remains an inference, not a required sequence.

Why the genotype cannot establish carcinoma

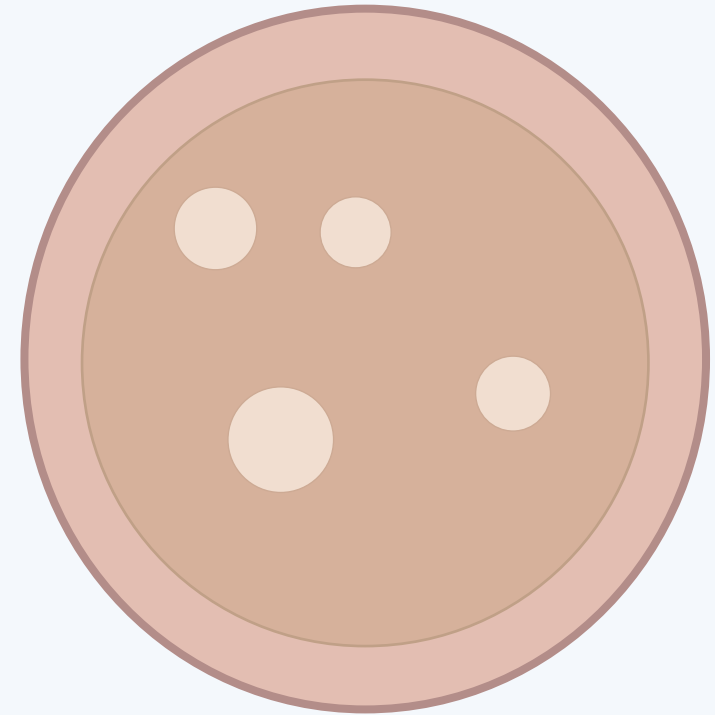
- A molecular result may help characterize follicular lineage or neoplastic risk.
- It does not visualize histologic penetration of a capsule or vessel.
- The definitive adenoma–carcinoma distinction remains a tissue-based assessment.



Schematic

Gross presentation: Usually solitary

- The typical lesion is a solitary thyroid nodule.
- Some tumors are sharply circumscribed; Others infiltrate widely.
- Clinical palpation or gross inspection may not separate adenoma from carcinoma.

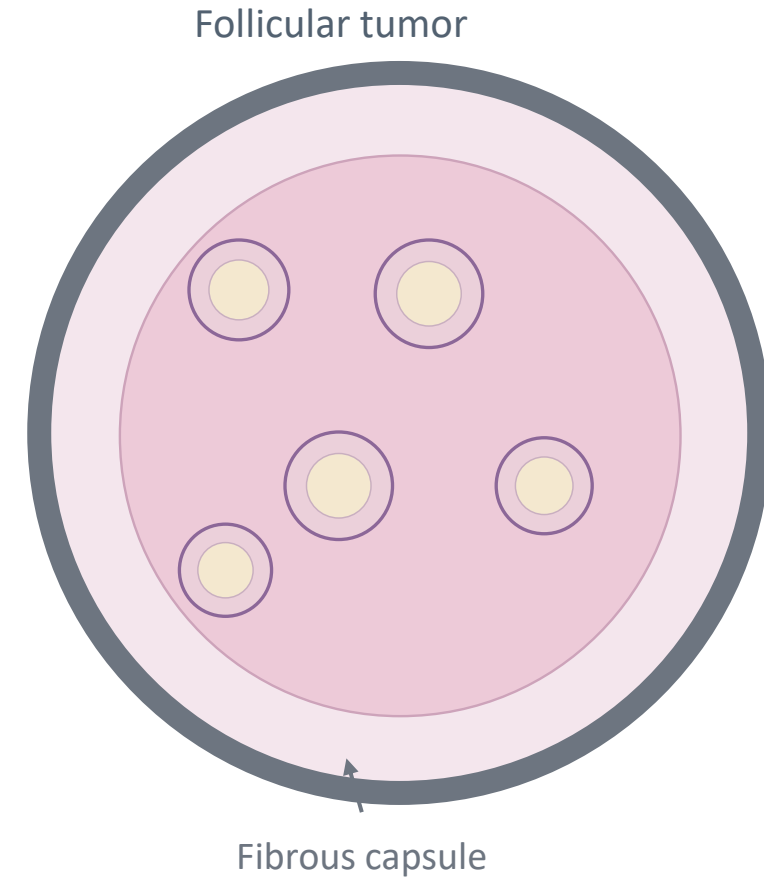


Original gross-cut schematic: Tan nodule with follicles

Schematic—not an authentic surgical specimen

Well-demarcated carcinoma can mimic adenoma

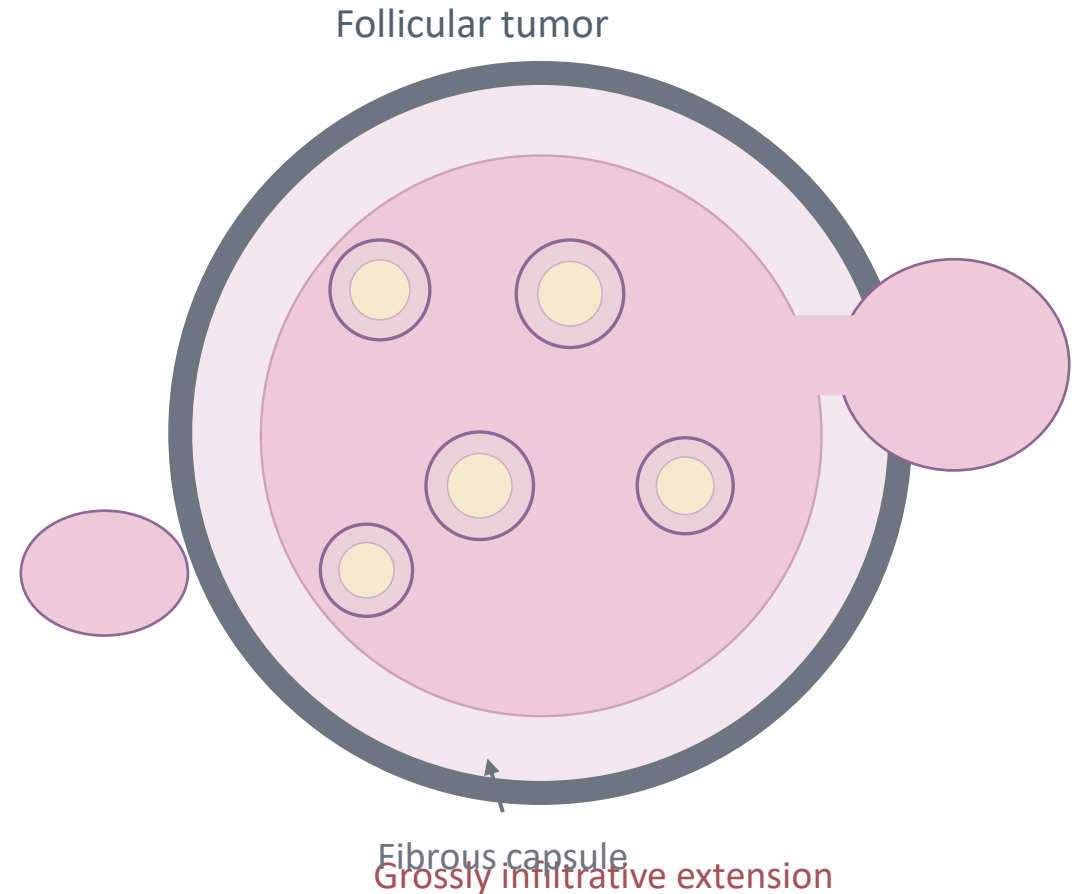
- A circumscribed carcinoma may appear encapsulated and benign.
- The capsule must be examined histologically for microscopic invasion.
- This explains why gross appearance alone cannot establish tumor behavior.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Widely infiltrative gross pattern

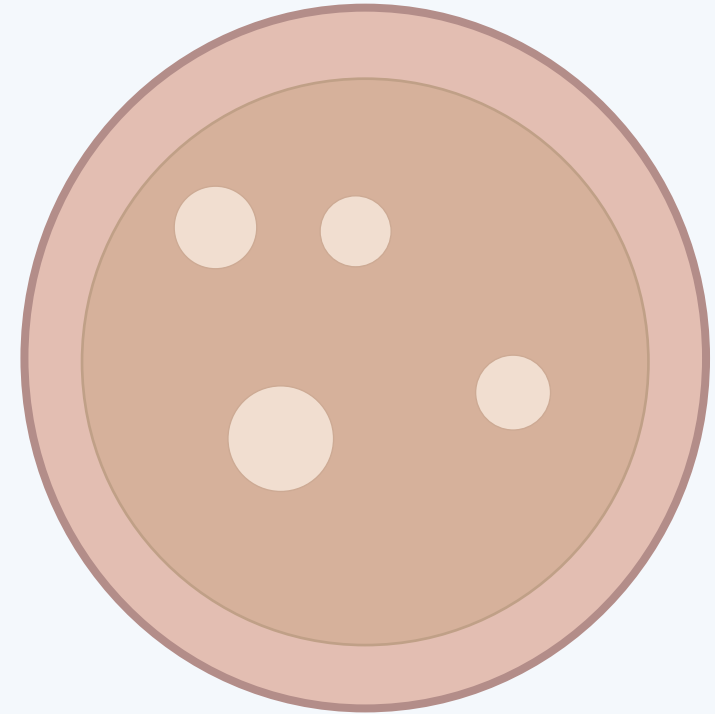
- More extensive tumors can extend through the capsule.
- They may penetrate adjacent thyroid and infiltrate soft tissues of the neck.
- Macroscopic invasion can make the malignant nature apparent.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Cut surface reflects retained follicles

- Follicular carcinoma is commonly gray, tan, or pink on cut section.
- Colloid-containing follicles can make tissue appear translucent.
- Colour or translucency does not determine whether invasion is present.

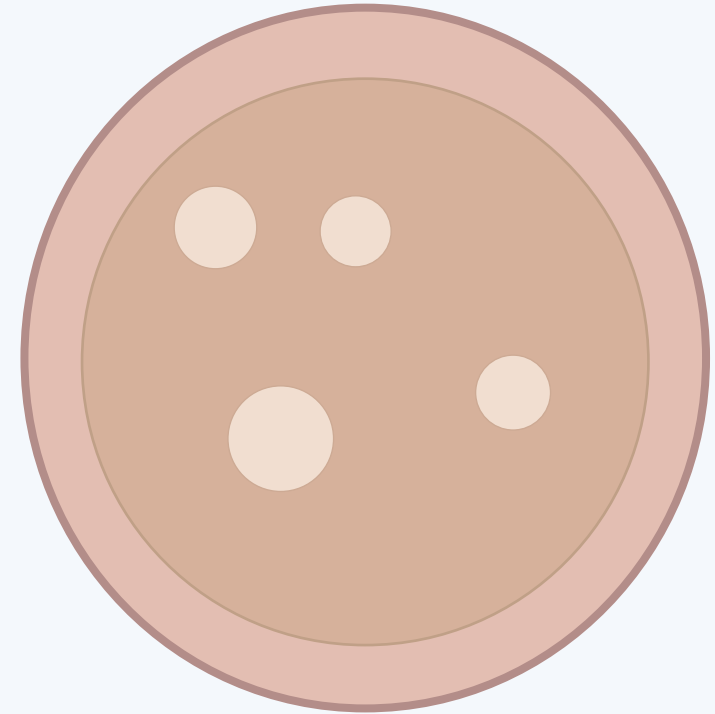


Original gross-cut schematic: Tan nodule with follicles

Schematic—not an authentic surgical specimen

Secondary gross changes

- Central fibrosis and coarse calcification can occur.
- Degenerative changes may modify an otherwise follicular cut surface.
- These changes are ancillary rather than defining carcinoma criteria.

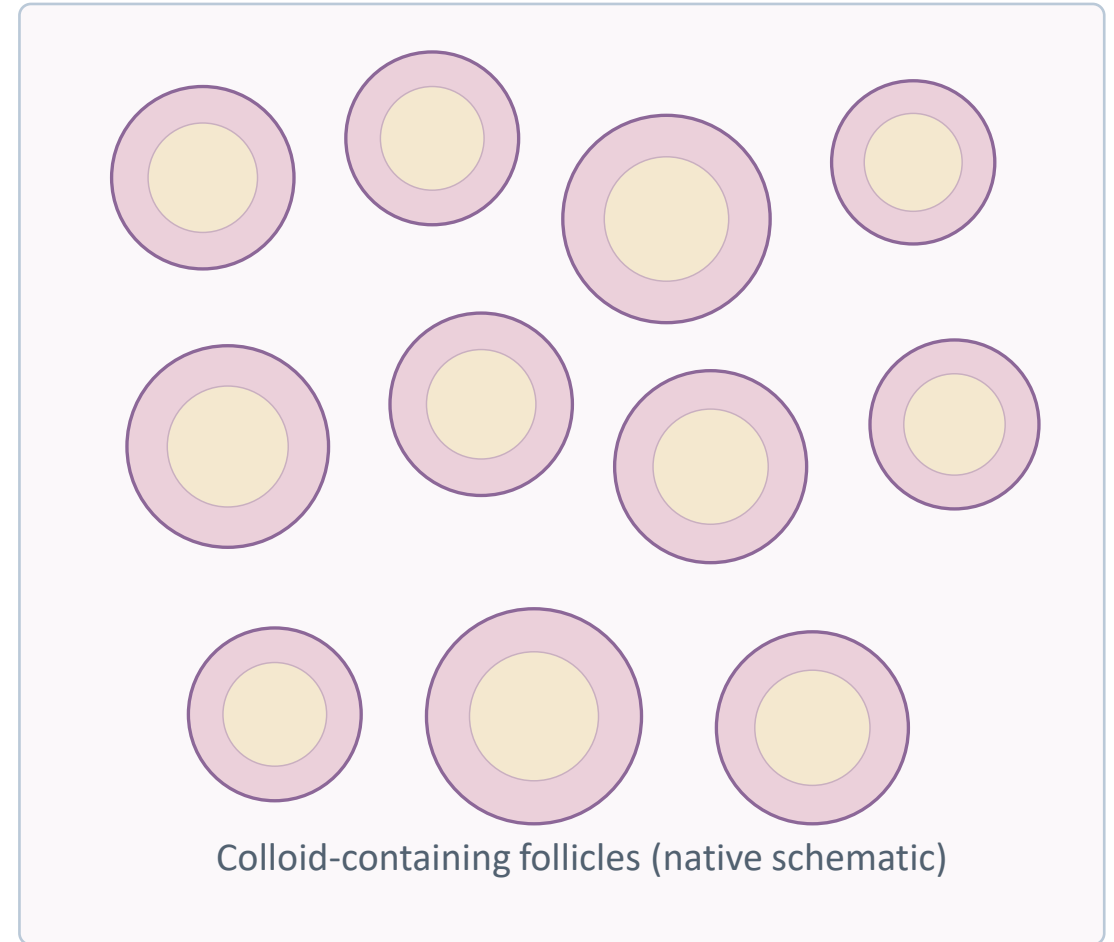


Original gross-cut schematic: Tan nodule with follicles

Schematic—not an authentic surgical specimen

Follicular microarchitecture

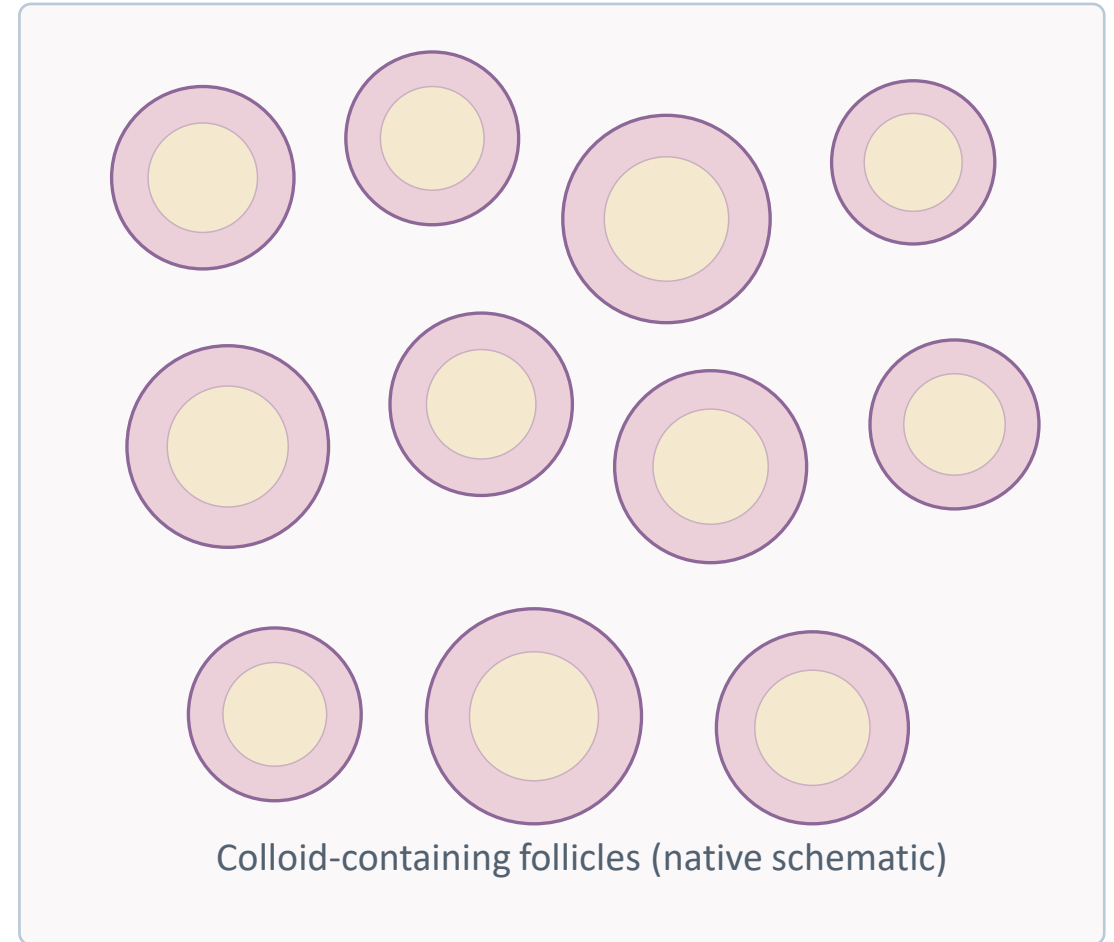
- Most tumors comprise relatively uniform epithelial cells.
- Cells organize into small follicles with variably recognizable colloid.
- At routine magnification, this may closely resemble native thyroid.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

Colloid does not imply benign behavior

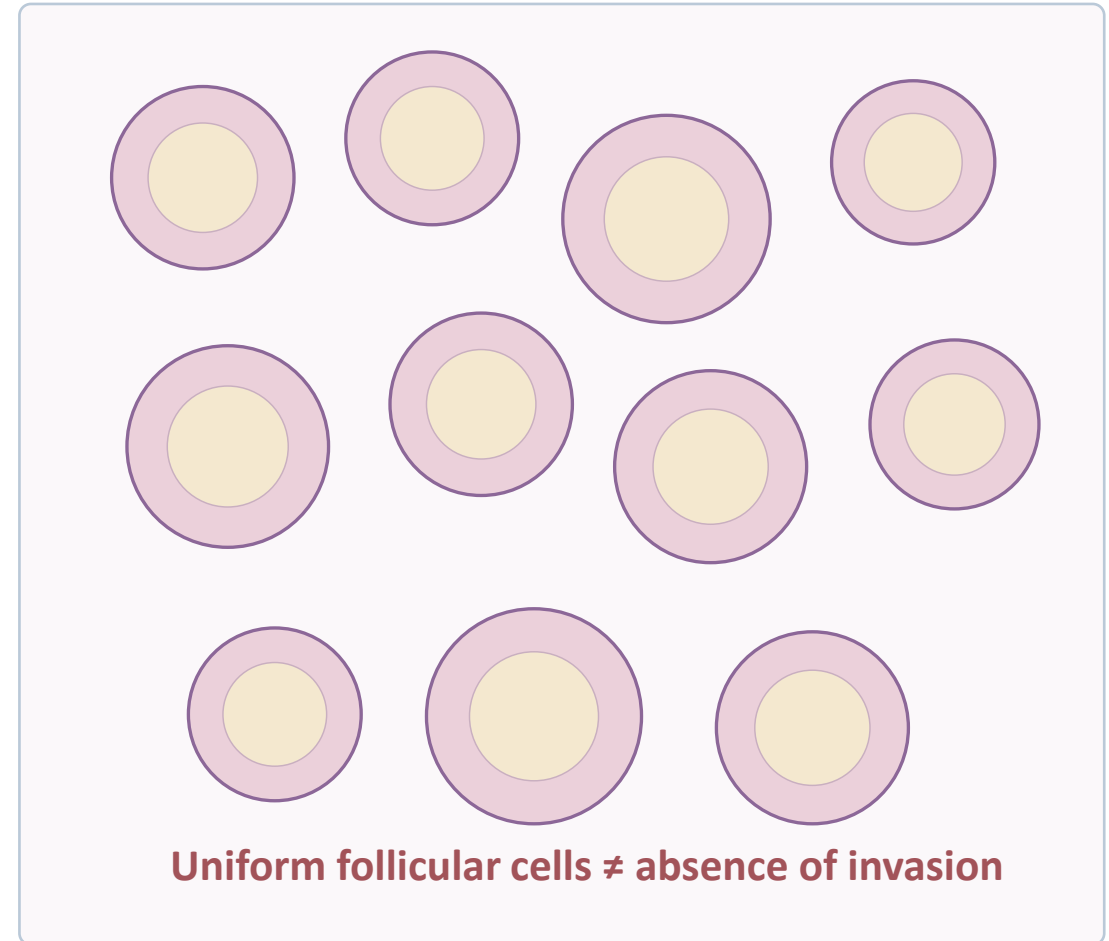
- Some malignant follicles retain colloid-filled lumens.
- Well-differentiated structure can coexist with true invasion.
- Assess architecture and the tumor–host interface, not colloid alone.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

Uniform nuclei are compatible with carcinoma

- Cells can be cytologically bland with minimal pleomorphism.
- Follicular carcinoma lacks the characteristic nuclei of papillary carcinoma.
- An apparently bland aspirate therefore cannot exclude follicular carcinoma.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

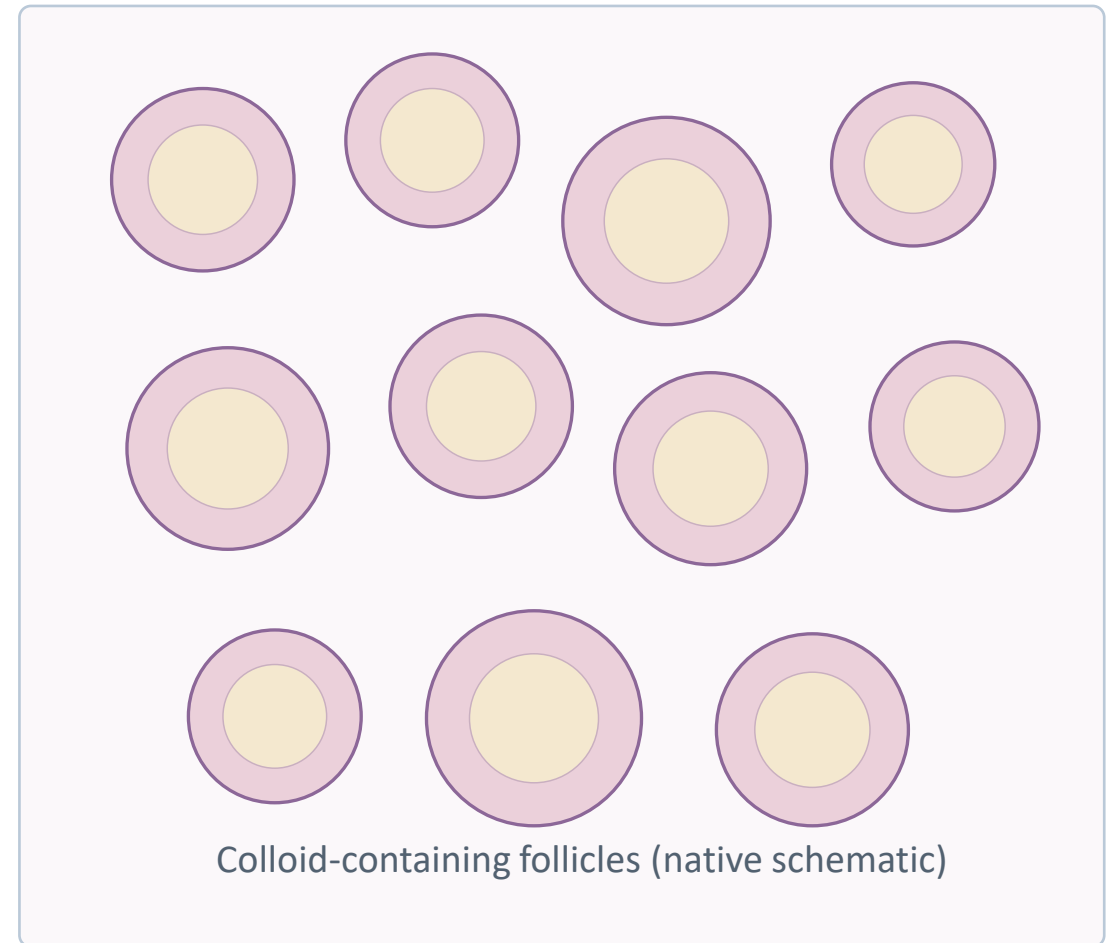
Features absent in conventional follicular carcinoma

Feature	Follicular carcinoma	Papillary carcinoma
Follicular growth	Usually present	Possible
PTC-type nuclei	Absent	Defining
Psammoma bodies	Absent	May occur
Typical spread	Hematogenous	Lymphatic

- Typical papillary-type nuclear clearing, grooves, and pseudoinclusions are absent.
- Psammoma bodies are not a usual feature of follicular carcinoma.
- If papillary-type nuclei are present, reconsider classification.

Oncocytic morphology requires recognition

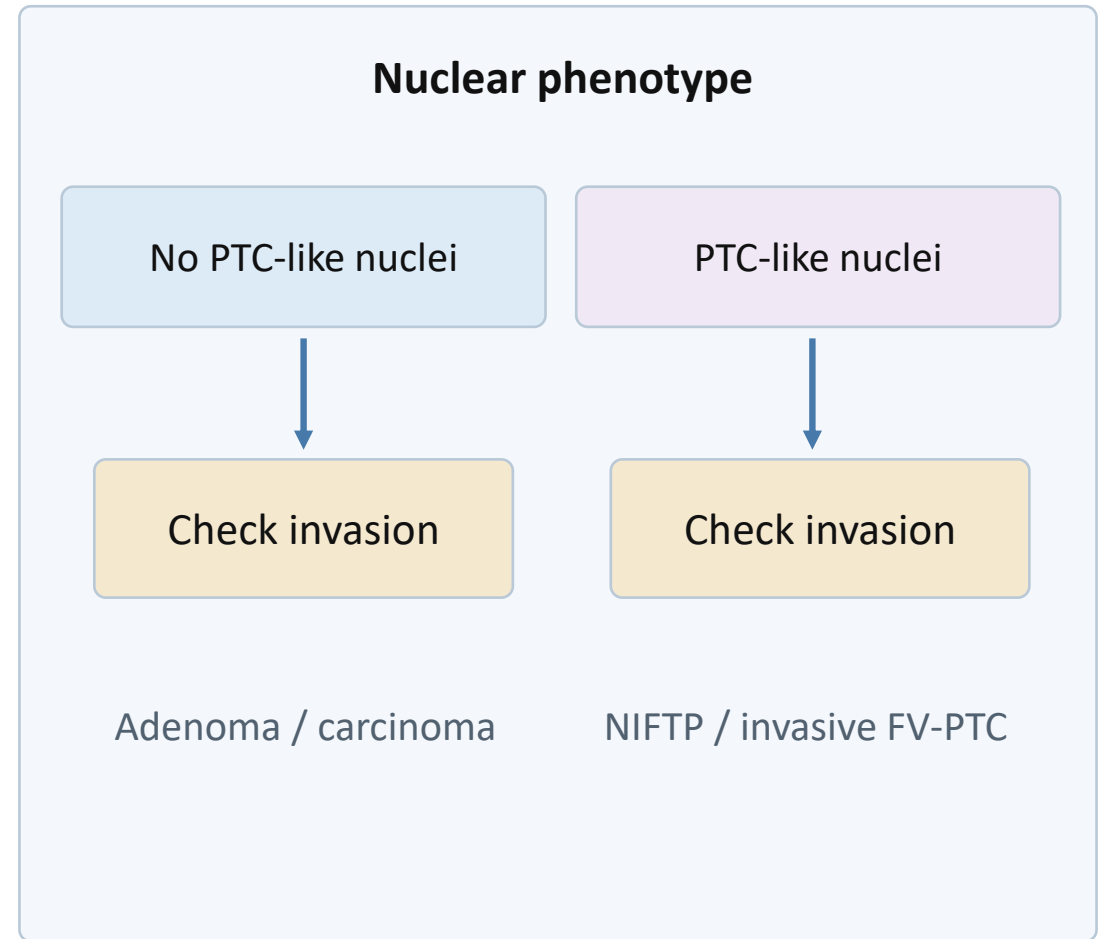
- A subset of follicular-derived carcinomas contains abundant granular eosinophilic cytoplasm.
- This oncocytic morphology alongside follicular carcinoma.
- The invasive interface remains important; Oncocytic appearance alone is not proof of carcinoma.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

Two morphologic routes to malignant diagnosis

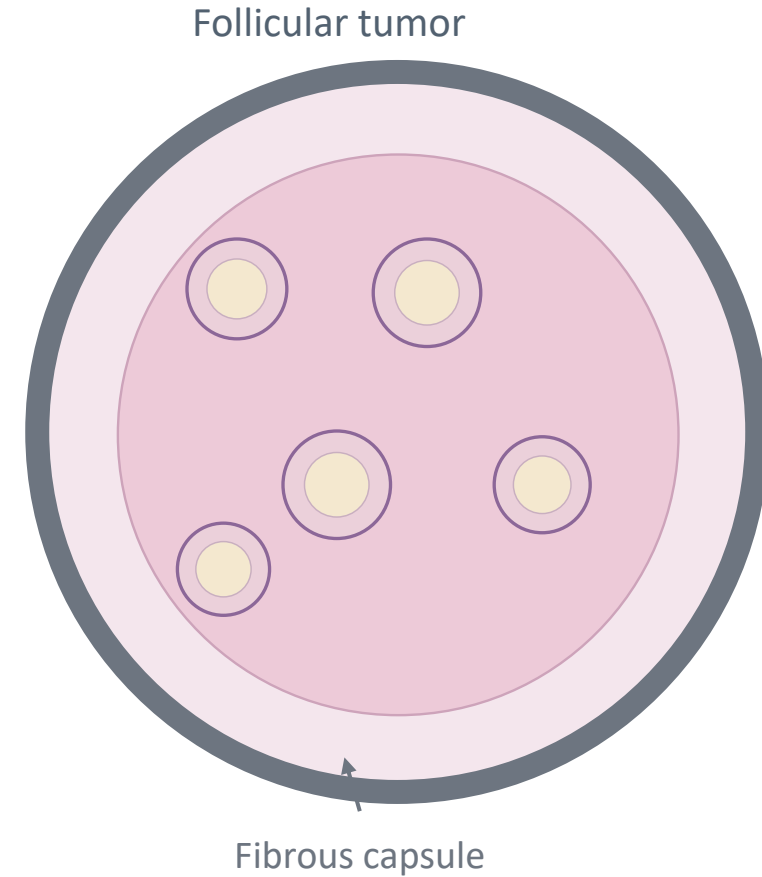
- Evidence of capsular invasion can establish carcinoma.
- Evidence of vascular invasion can independently establish carcinoma.
- Widely invasive tumors are usually evident through destructive tissue infiltration.



Schematic

Intact capsule: A benign pattern

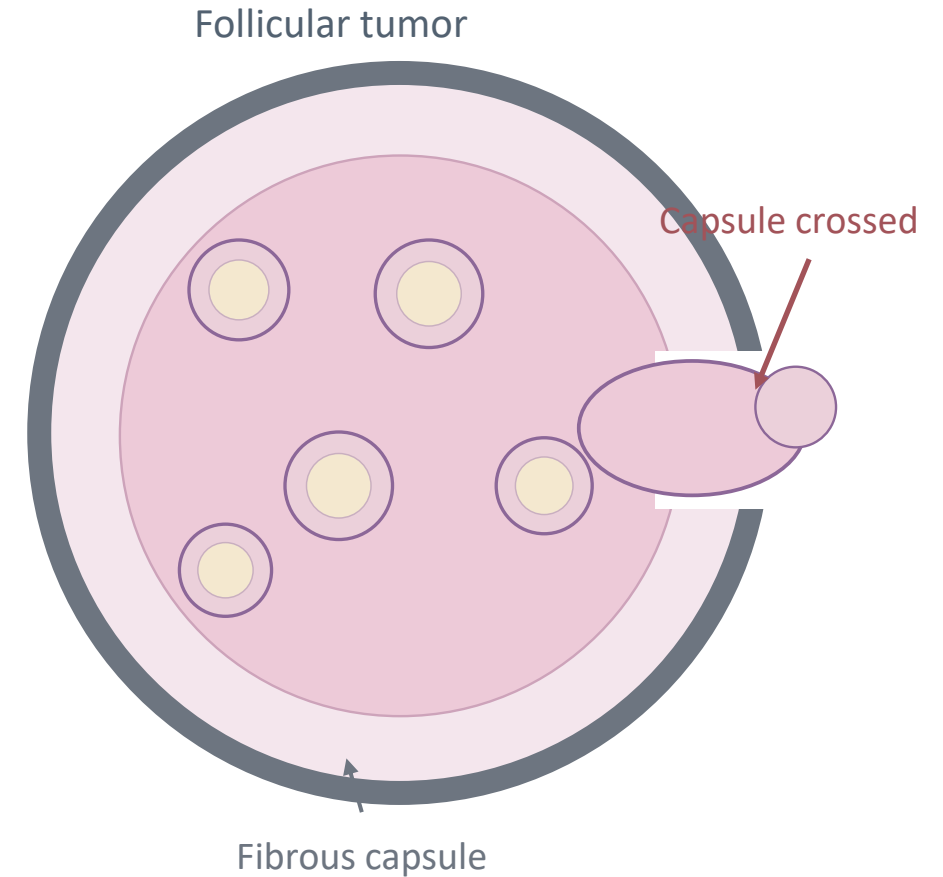
- Adenoma has a circumferential fibrous capsule without tumor penetration.
- Compressed non-neoplastic follicles can lie outside the capsule.
- Careful orientation is essential to interpret the interface.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Capsular invasion: Tumor crossing the boundary

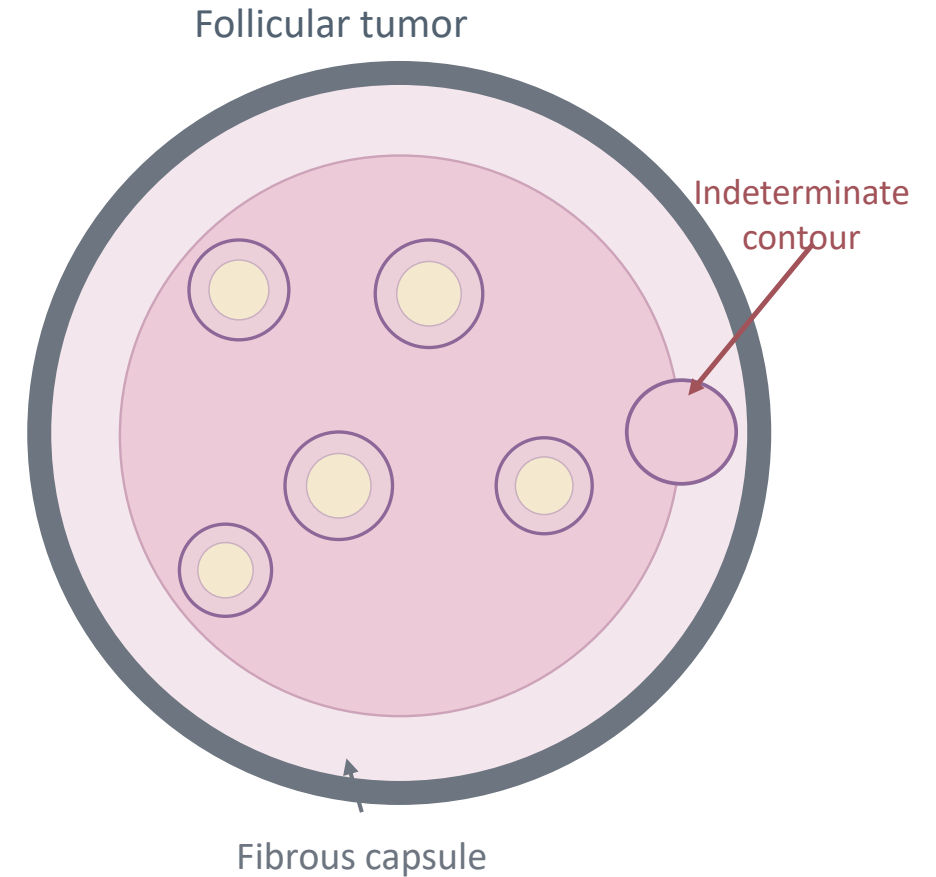
- Tumor penetrates through the capsule into tissue beyond its outer boundary.
- A small focus may be the only malignant feature.
- The pathologist must evaluate the full capsule interface.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Why partial protrusion needs caution

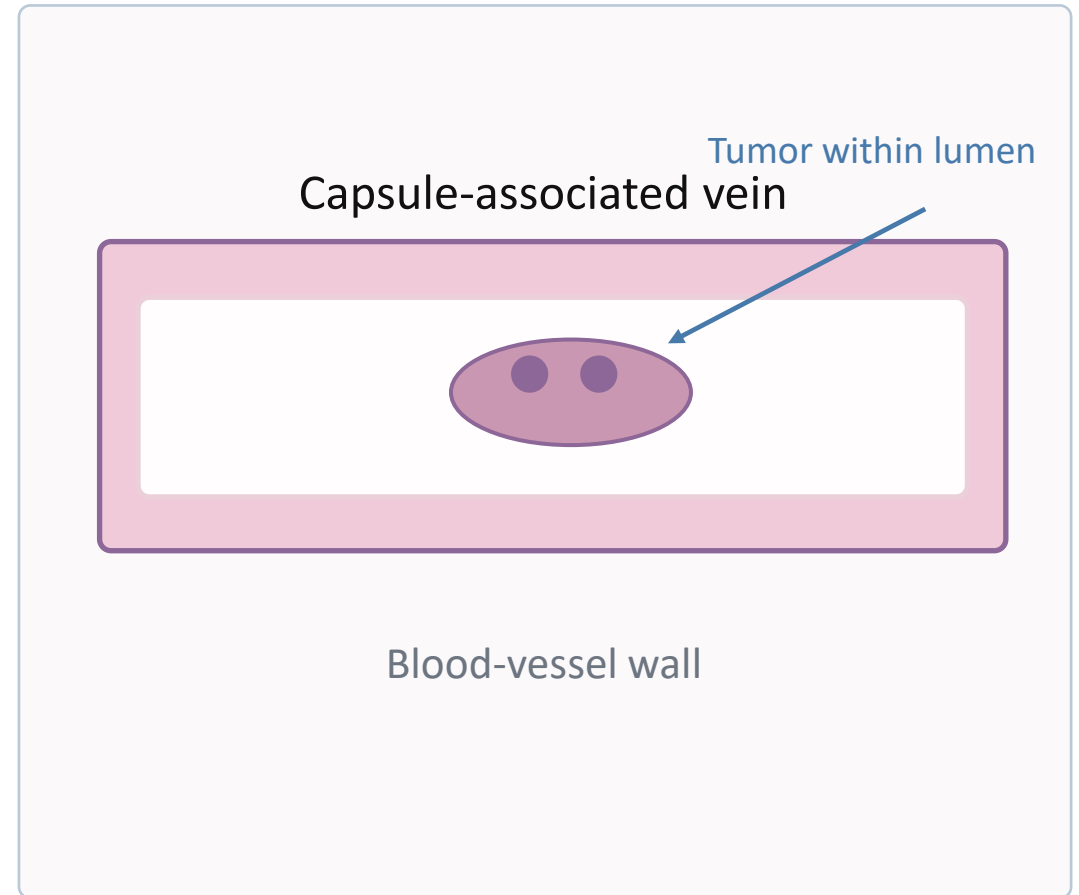
- A focus near the outer capsule contour may be difficult to orient.
- Limited sections can obscure whether invasion is complete.
- When uncertain, more complete capsule sampling can clarify the interface.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Vascular invasion: A second decisive route

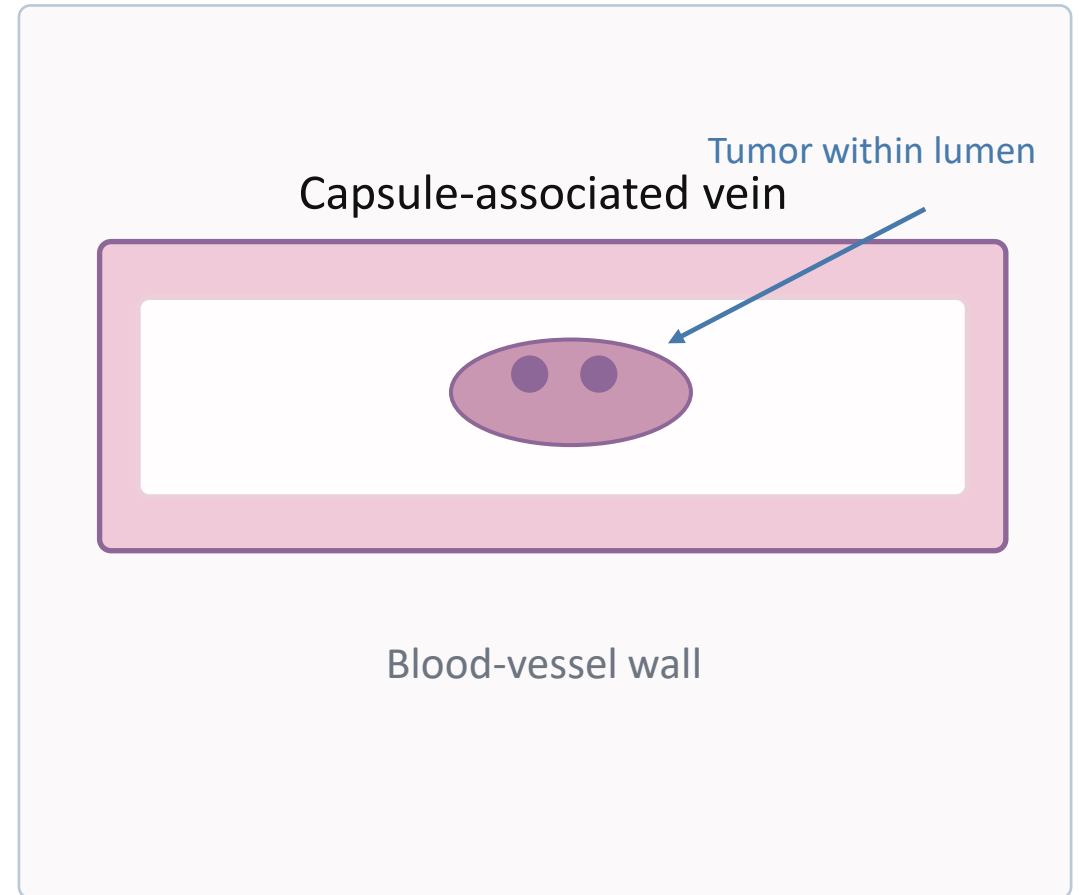
- Vascular invasion occurs in venous channels.
- Relevant vessels lie within the capsule or just beyond it.
- Intravenous tumor provides an anatomic route for distant metastasis.



Schematic—venous invasion; Not a micrograph

Vascular invasion is not simple congestion

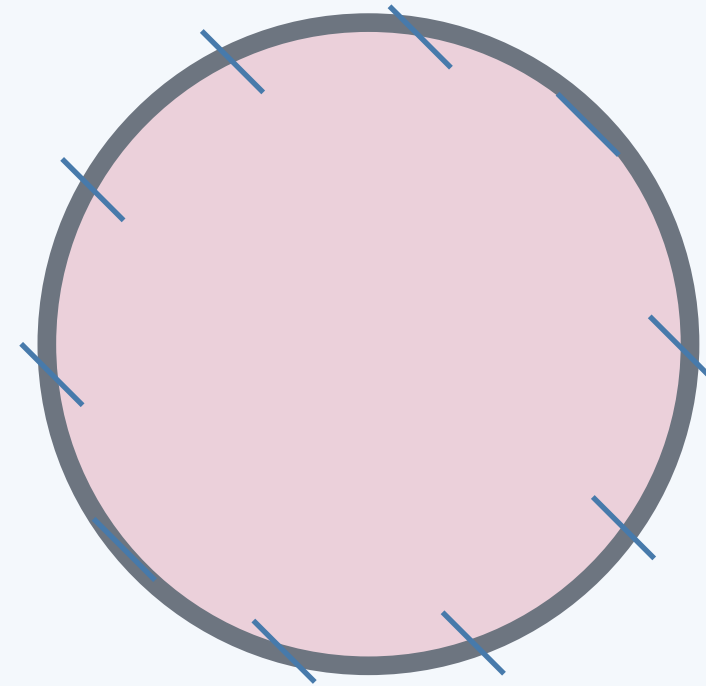
- A vessel must contain neoplastic tissue, not only erythrocytes.
- The tissue relationship to a bona fide venous lumen must be interpretable.
- Indeterminate artifacts should not be overcalled as definite invasion.



Schematic—venous invasion; Not a micrograph

Why the capsule needs extensive sampling

- Microscopic invasion may be focal despite an otherwise complete capsule.
- A few representative sections may miss the diagnostic focus.
- Histology must sample enough of the tumor–capsule interface to assess invasion.

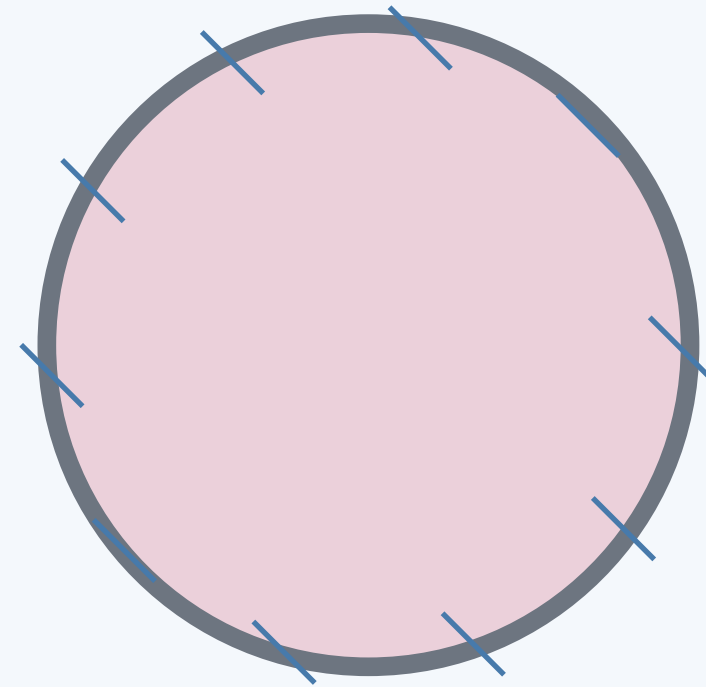


Serial blocks evaluate the interface

Schematic—capsule sampling, not a universal block count

Sampling begins with correct orientation

- Examine the relationship among tumor, fibrous capsule, and surrounding thyroid.
- Direct attention to suspicious breaks, protrusions, and capsule-associated vessels.
- Preserve the spatial relationship in histologic sections.

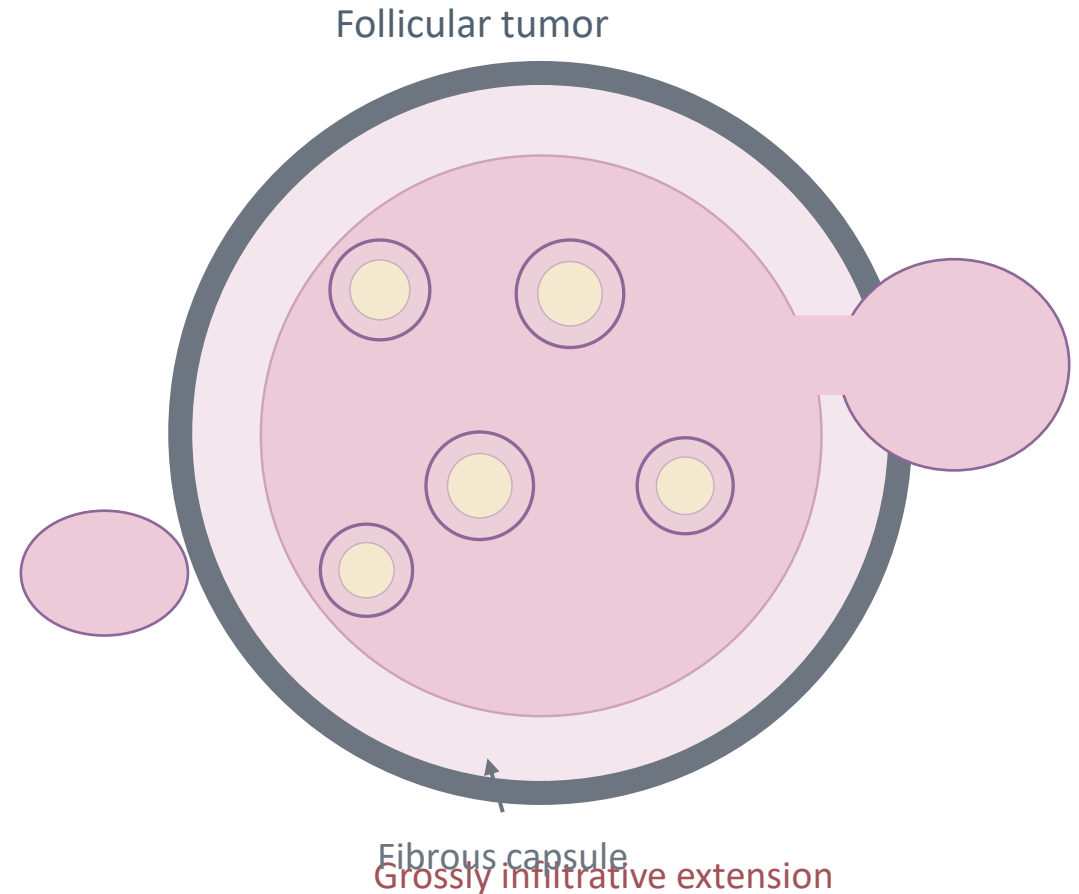


Serial blocks evaluate the interface

Schematic—capsule sampling, not a universal block count

Widely invasive carcinoma

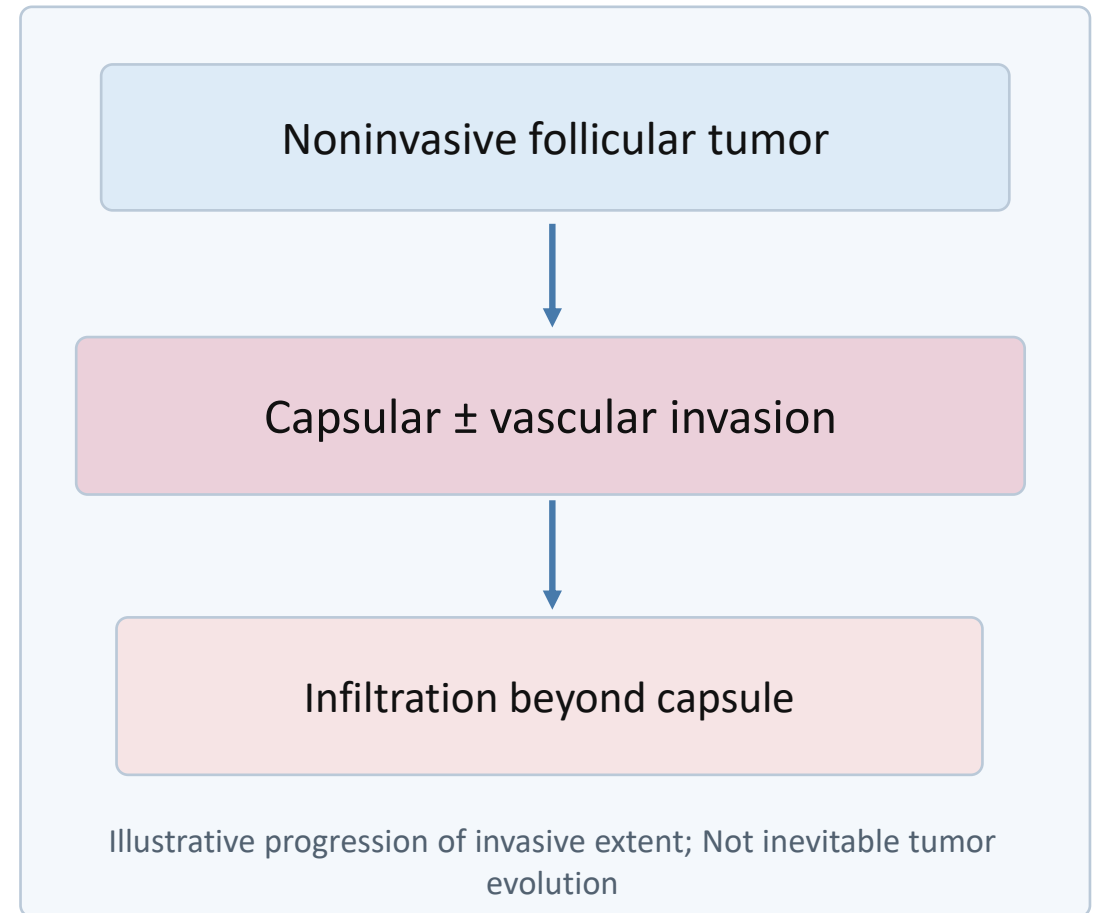
- Invasion into native thyroid parenchyma can be conspicuous.
- Extrathyroidal soft tissue extension indicates local infiltrative behavior.
- This morphology contrasts with a solitary focal microscopic invasion.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

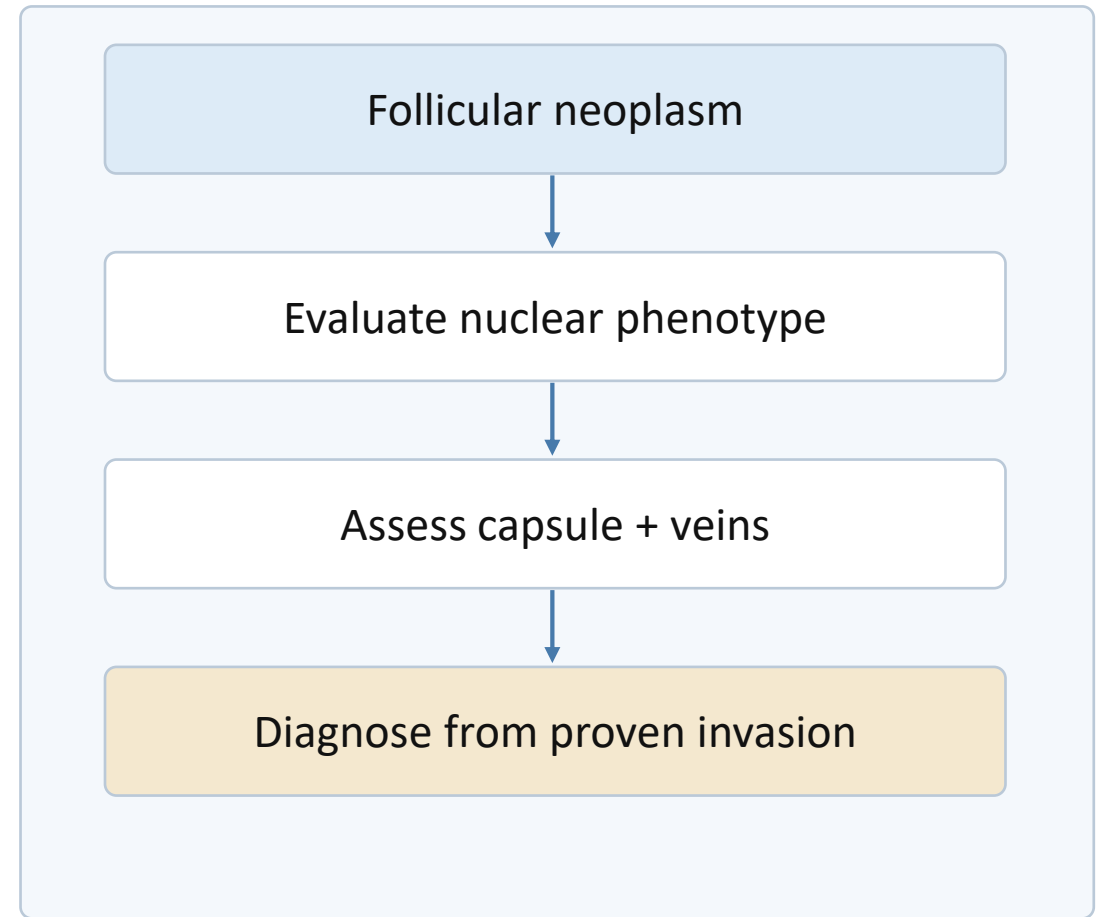
Invasion categories have prognostic meaning

- Minimal invasion and widespread infiltration indicate different behaviors.
- The extent of invasion is central to prognosis.
- Report the observed pattern rather than relying on bland-looking cells.



A practical histology decision sequence

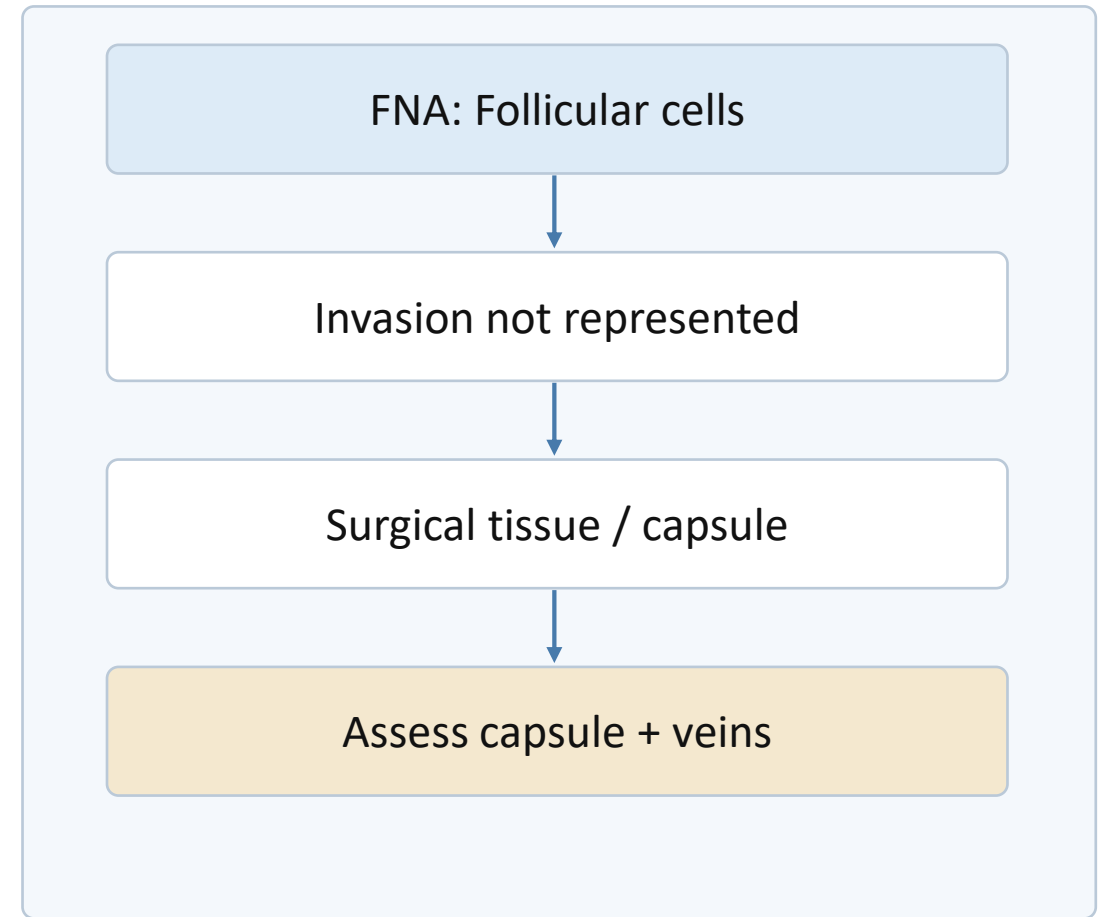
- First establish a follicular-patterned neoplasm and examine the nuclear phenotype.
- Then assess the complete relevant capsule and vascular interface.
- Definite capsular/vascular invasion supports follicular carcinoma if PTC-type nuclei are absent.



Schematic

Fine-needle aspiration cannot assess the capsule

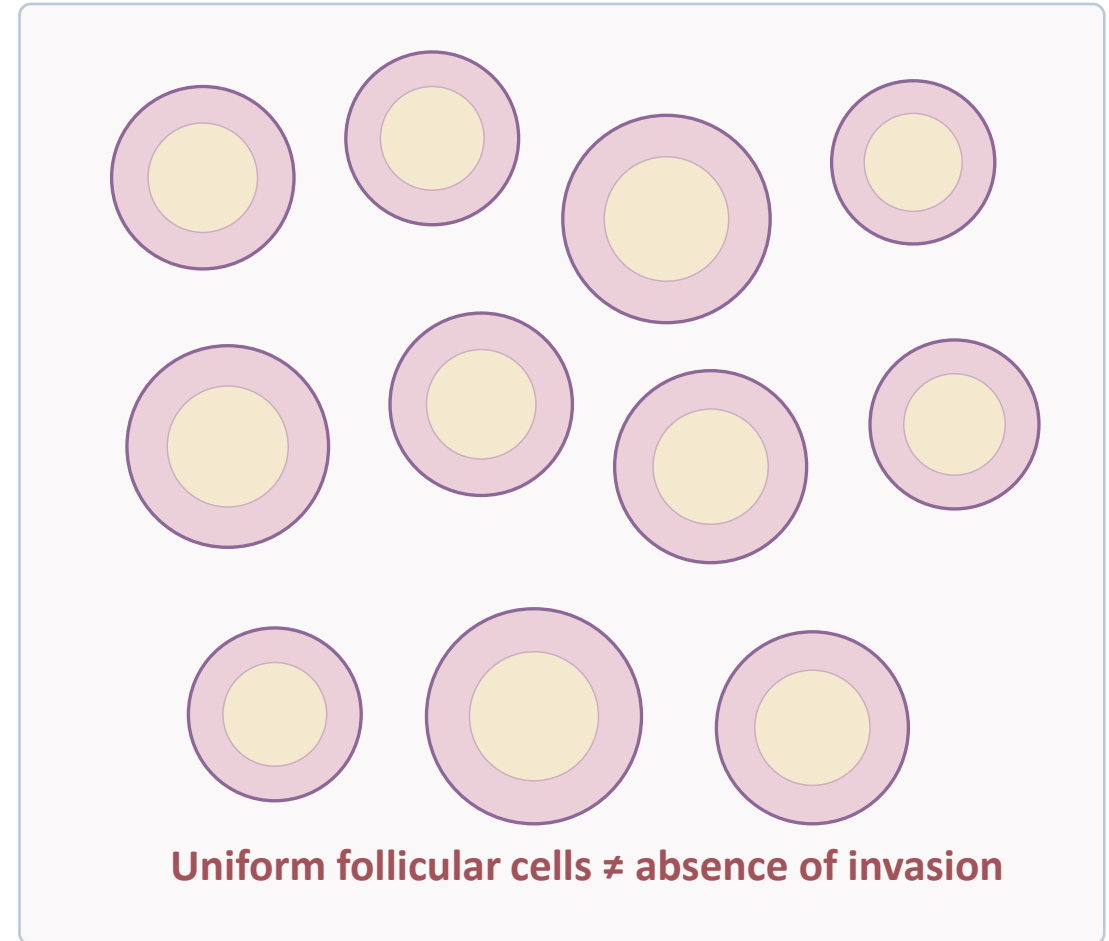
- An aspirate samples cells, not the entire tumor–capsule boundary.
- Adenoma and minimally invasive follicular carcinoma share cytologic appearances.
- A follicular-patterned aspirate may therefore remain indeterminate for malignancy.



Schematic

Why benign-appearing cells are insufficient

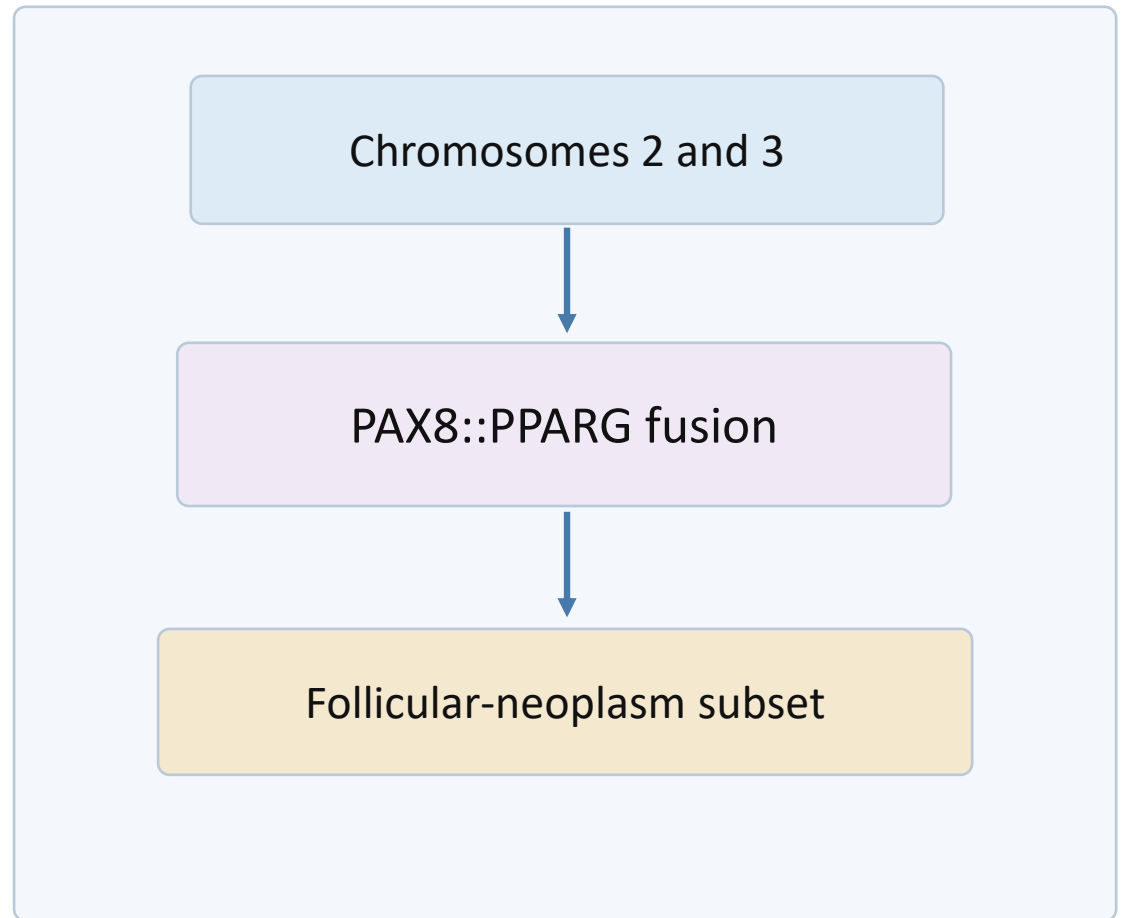
- A cytology slide may demonstrate orderly follicular epithelial groups.
- Neither the presence nor absence of capsular penetration is visible.
- The diagnostic question is fundamentally architectural and invasive.



Schematic—not an H&E photomicrograph

Molecular testing: Informative but limited

- Molecular analysis may assist assessment of indeterminate thyroid nodules.
- RAS positivity can occur in both adenoma and follicular carcinoma.
- Do not label a cytologic sample carcinoma based on a shared driver alone.



Schematic—simplified pathway relationships

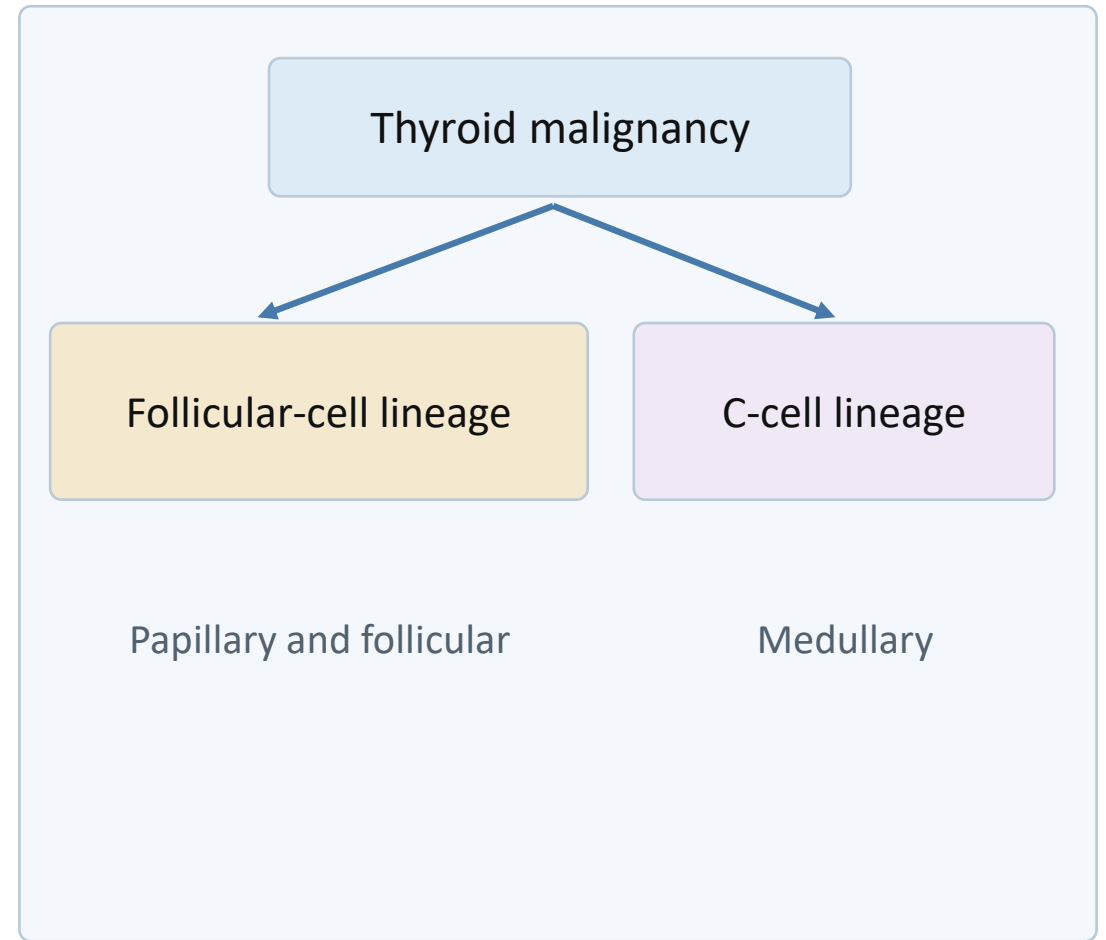
Distinguish papillary nuclear phenotype

Nuclear feature	Follicular carcinoma	PTC
Optically clear chromatin	Not typical	Characteristic
Nuclear grooves	Not typical	Common
Pseudoinclusions	Not typical	Can occur
Psammoma bodies	Absent	May occur

- Conventional PTC exhibits chromatin clearing, nuclear grooves, and pseudoinclusions.
- Follicular carcinoma lacks these characteristic nuclear changes.
- The differential hinges on nuclear phenotype and invasion pattern.

Growth pattern alone does not define PTC

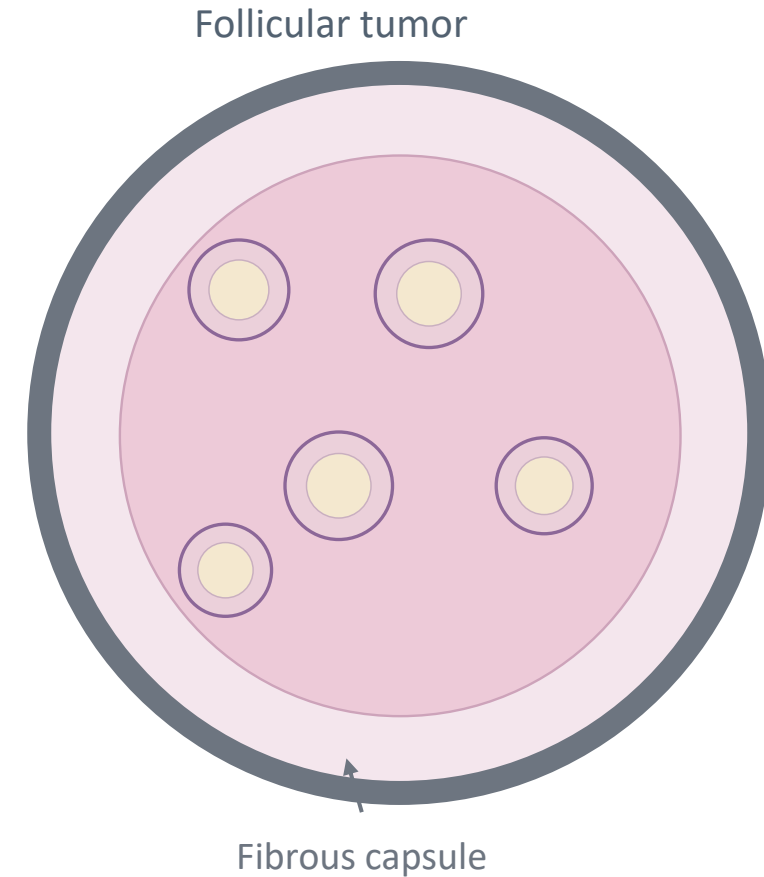
- Follicular growth is shared by carcinoma, adenoma, and follicular-patterned PTC.
- Papillary carcinoma can adopt predominantly follicular architecture.
- Nuclear findings are essential to the distinction.



Schematic

NIFTP: Noninvasive, but papillary-like nuclei

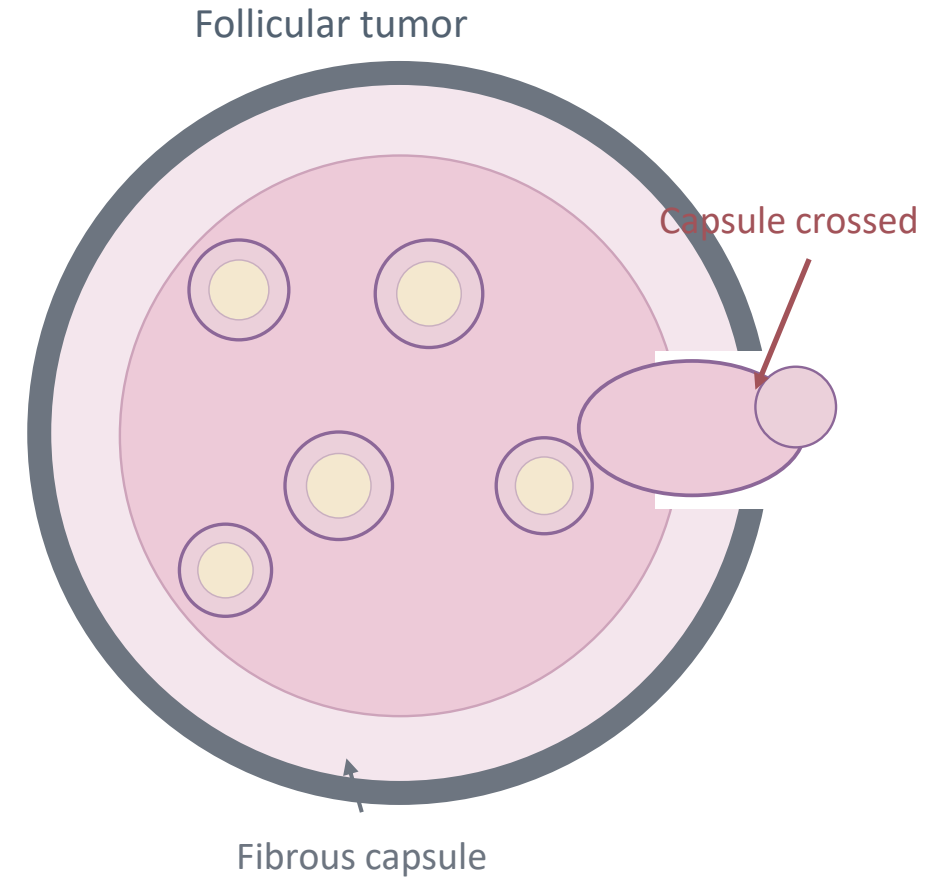
- NIFTP shows follicular growth with PTC-like nuclear features.
- Strictly noninvasive lesions meet distinct diagnostic criteria.
- Its very low recurrence/metastatic risk supports the non-carcinoma designation.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Invasive encapsulated follicular variant of PTC

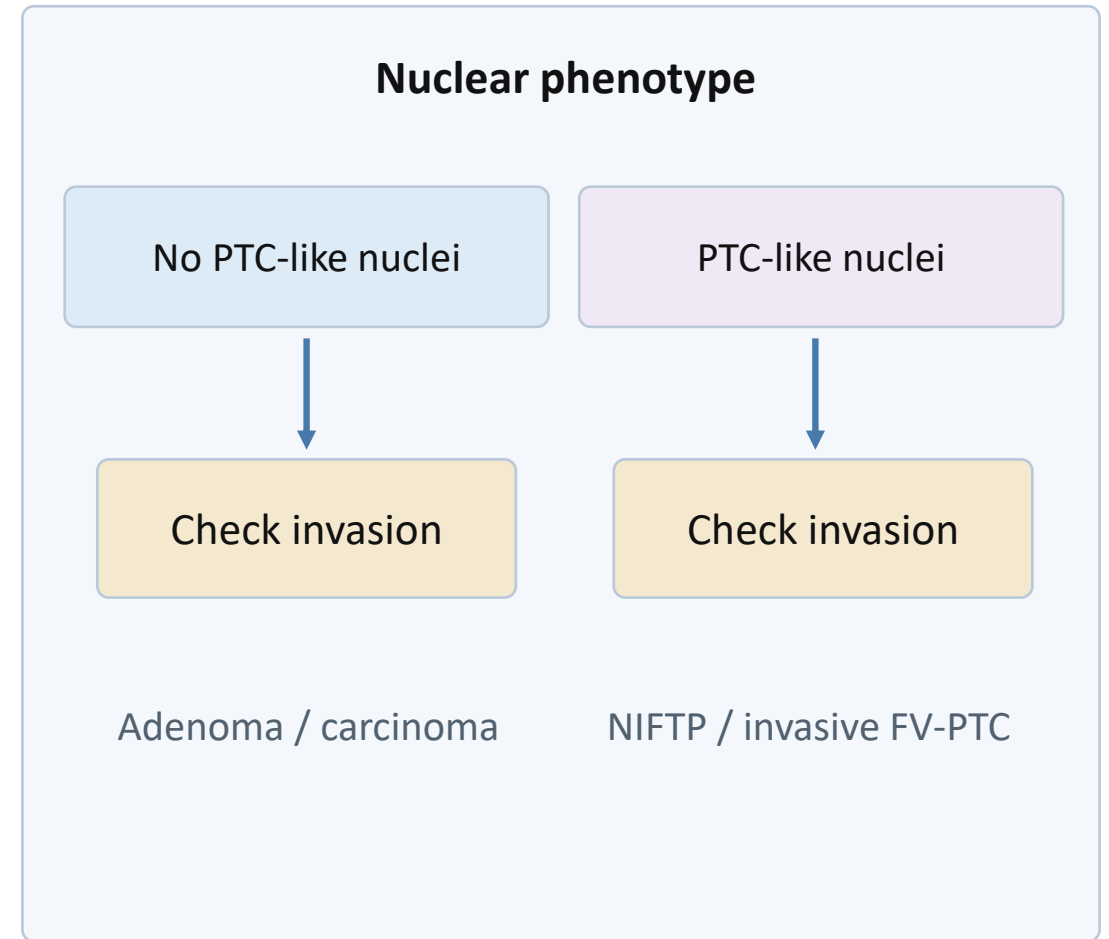
- Follicular growth and papillary-type nuclei can coexist with invasion.
- Invasive encapsulated follicular variant of PTC is distinguished from NIFTP by invasion.
- RAS-like biology and hematogenous spread may overlap with follicular carcinoma.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

A two-axis classification framework

- First axis: Follicular carcinoma nuclei versus PTC-like nuclear features.
- Second axis: No demonstrated invasion versus proven invasion.
- The combination directs classification, not follicular pattern alone.



Schematic

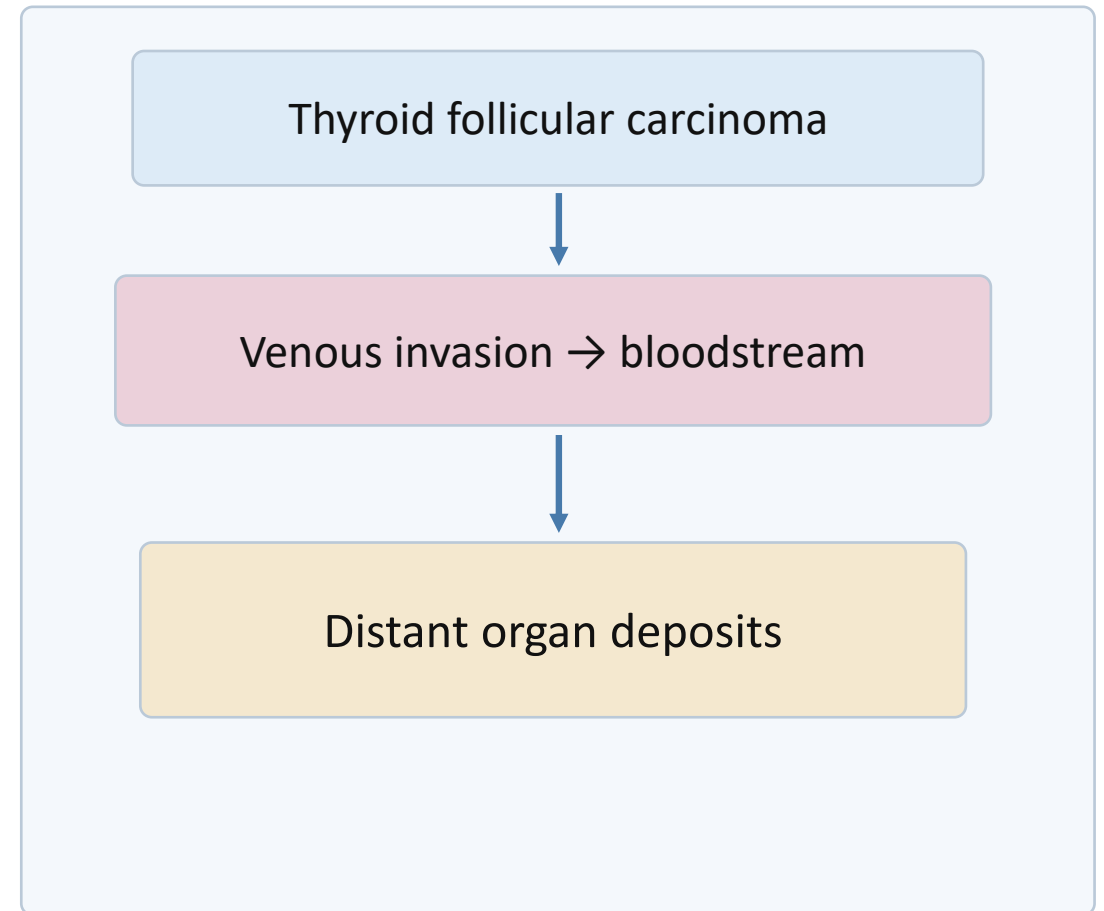
Core differential diagnoses

Entity	PTC-like nuclei	Invasion
Follicular adenoma	Absent	Absent
Follicular carcinoma	Absent	Present
NIFTP	Present	Absent (strict criteria)
Invasive encapsulated FV-PTC	Present	Present

- Follicular adenoma: No capsular or vascular invasion.
- Follicular carcinoma: Invasive lesion without typical PTC-type nuclear features.
- NIFTP or invasive encapsulated follicular variant PTC: Follicular growth plus PTC-type nuclei.

Why lymph nodes are usually not involved

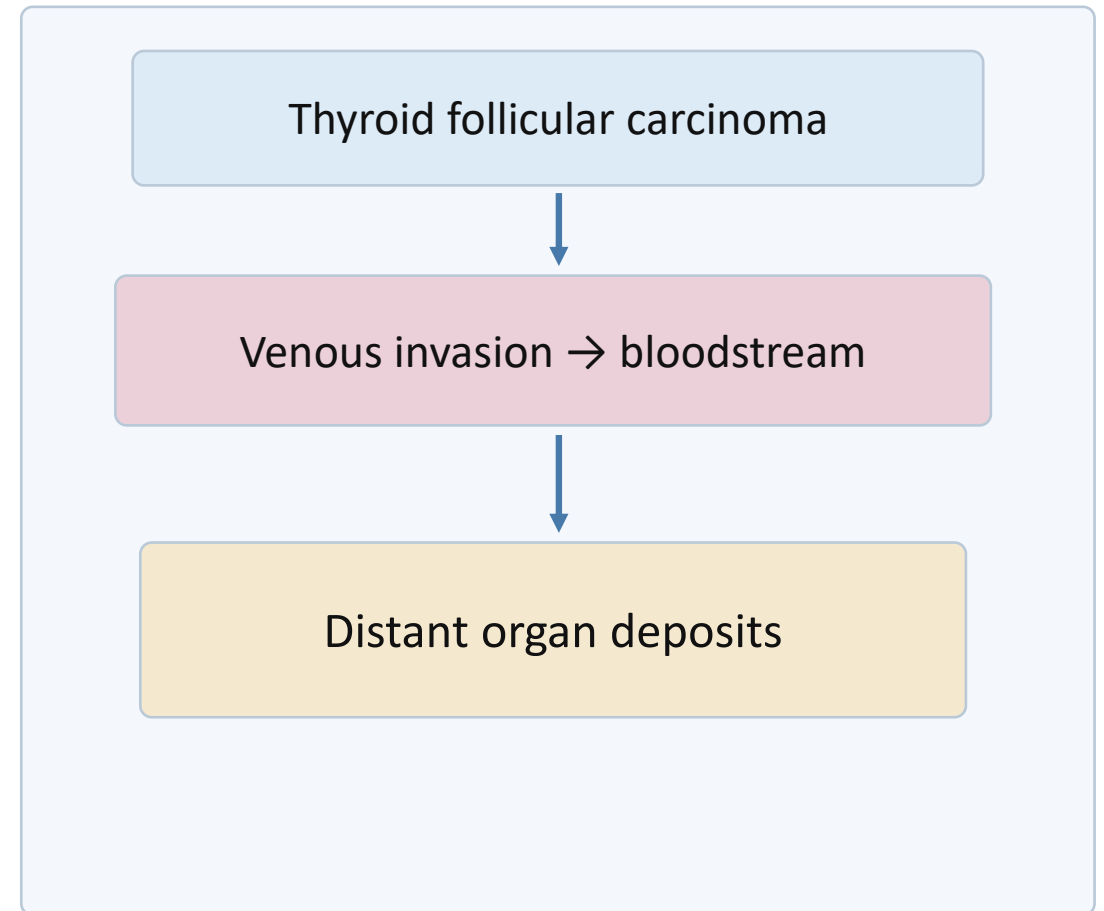
- Follicular carcinoma has relatively little tendency to enter lymphatic channels.
- Cervical nodal metastases are therefore less typical than in papillary carcinoma.
- Absence of involved nodes does not imply absence of systemic spread.



Schematic—hematogenous route; Not a measured risk model

Hematogenous dissemination

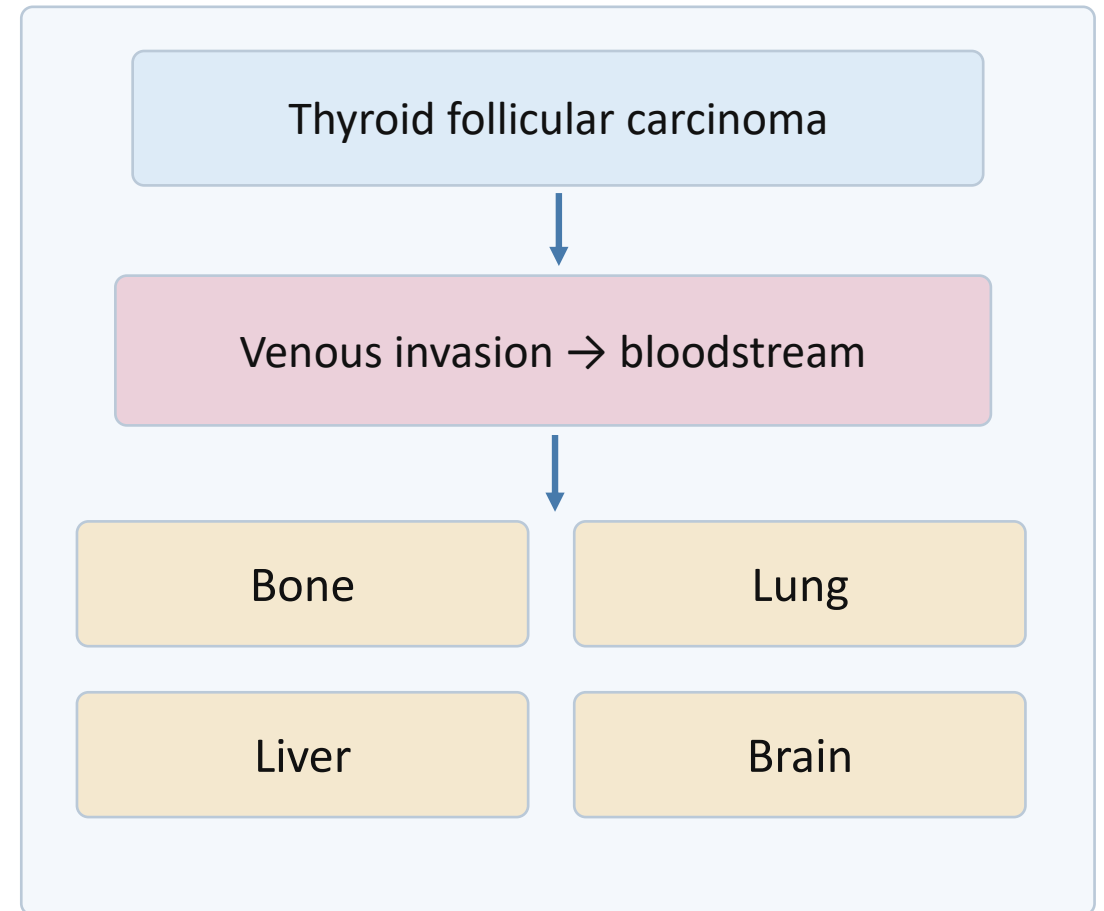
- Vascular invasion enables venous access by malignant follicular cells.
- Tumor cells may travel through the bloodstream to distant tissues.
- This is the characteristic metastatic pathway emphasized in the source.



Schematic—hematogenous route; Not a measured risk model

Common distant metastatic sites

- Bone and lungs are important metastatic destinations.
- Liver and brain may also be involved.
- These sites reflect a systemic route of dissemination.



Schematic—hematogenous route; Not a measured risk model

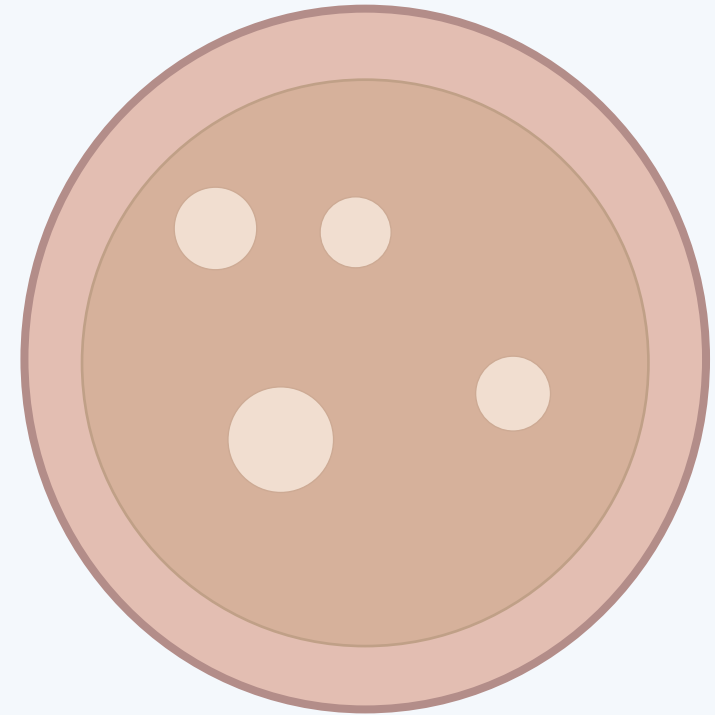
Compare dissemination with papillary carcinoma

Feature	Follicular	Papillary
Route emphasized	Hematogenous	Lymphatic
Regional nodes	Typically spared	Often involved
Distant spread	Bone / lung etc.	May occur
Nuclear morphology	No PTC nuclei	PTC nuclei

- Papillary thyroid carcinoma often exhibits lymphatic invasion and cervical nodal deposits.
- Follicular carcinoma more characteristically spreads through blood vessels.
- The patterns overlap; They are tendencies, not absolute prohibitions.

Typical clinical presentation

- The nodule is usually painless and slowly enlarging.
- Local examination may not reveal benign versus malignant histology.
- Asymptomatic disease is entirely possible.



Original gross-cut schematic: Tan nodule with follicles

Schematic—not an authentic surgical specimen

Thyroid scintigraphy: Often a cold nodule

- Most follicular carcinomas appear nonfunctioning (“cold”) on scintigraphy.
- Cold status does not establish carcinoma—it identifies functional behavior.
- Morphologic evidence remains required for definitive classification.

Nonfunctioning / cold: Usual

Warm / functioning: Very rare

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Rare functioning follicular carcinomas

- Better-differentiated lesions can very rarely be hyperfunctional.
- Such tumors may concentrate radioiodine and appear warm.
- Functional activity should not be used as an absolute benignity rule.

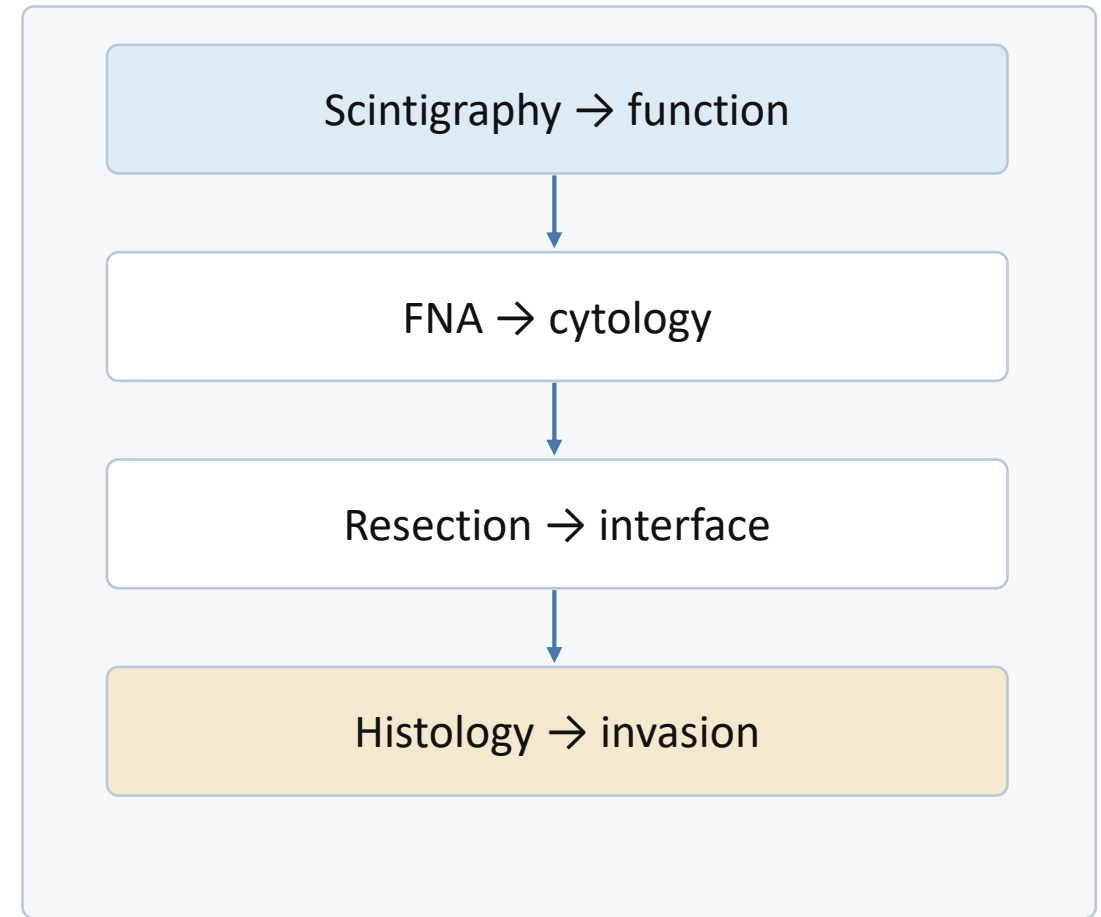
Nonfunctioning / cold: Usual

Warm / functioning: Very rare

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Imaging and cytology answer different questions

- Scintigraphy characterizes thyroid nodule function.
- FNA examines sampled cellular morphology.
- Histology of the interface establishes capsular or vascular invasion.



Schematic

What determines prognosis?

- Extent of invasion is an important prognostic determinant.
- Stage at presentation, particularly systemic metastasis, is crucial.
- Do not infer risk from a single bland cytology field.

Minimally invasive

10-year survival >90%

Widely invasive

Up to half die within 10 years

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Minimally invasive carcinoma: Favorable prognosis

- Ten-year survival exceeds 90% estimate.
- This estimate pertains to minimally invasive disease.
- It must not be generalized to widely invasive tumors.

Minimally invasive

10-year survival >90%

Widely invasive

Up to half die within 10 years

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

Widely invasive carcinoma: A different course

- Widely invasive tumors often present with distant metastases.
- As many as one-half die of disease within 10 years.
- These figures reflect a high-risk subgroup, not all follicular carcinomas.

Minimally invasive

10-year survival >90%

Widely invasive

Up to half die within 10 years

Conceptual display; Numeric estimates where shown

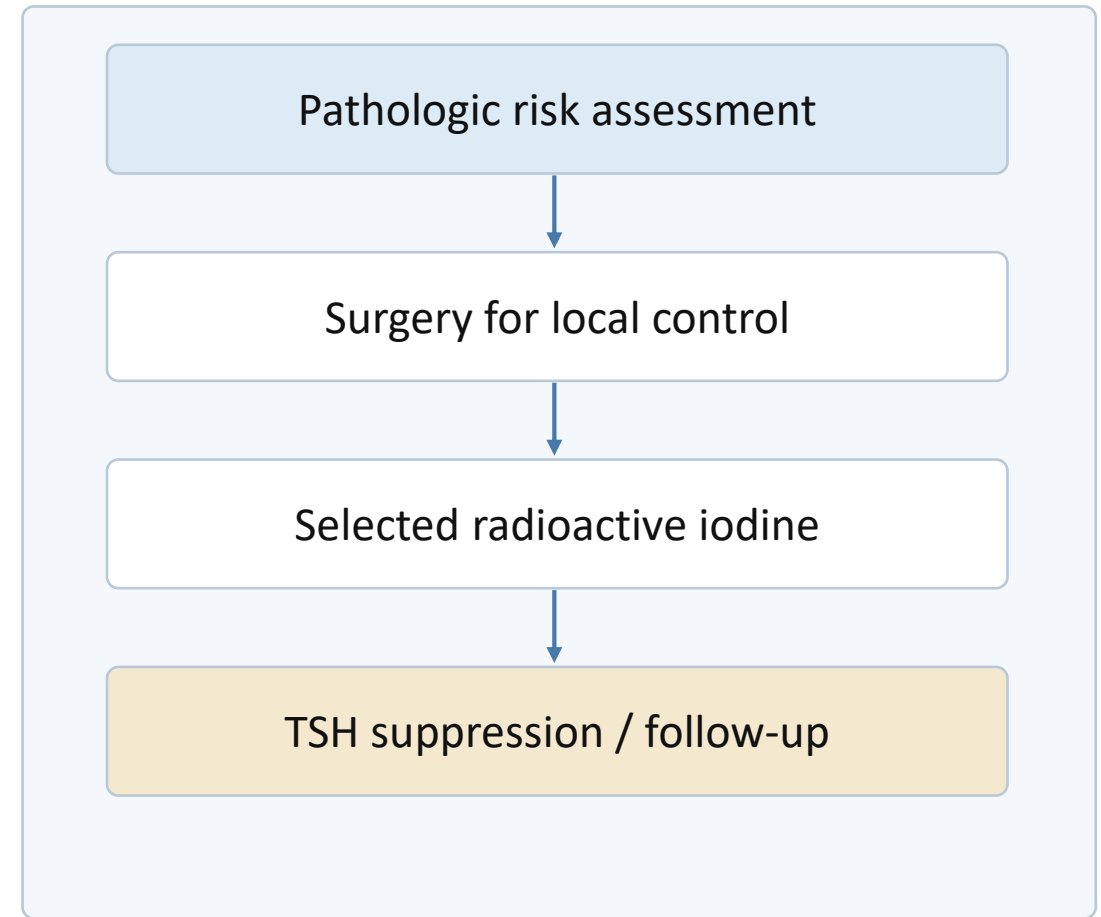
Avoid mixing prognosis measures

Clinical setting	10-year statement in source	Interpretation
Minimally invasive	>90% survival	Favorable subgroup
Widely invasive	Up to 50% death	High-risk subgroup

- “Survival over 90%” and “up to half die” refer to different invasion groups.
- Their denominators and clinical populations are not interchangeable.
- A pathology report should communicate the invasion findings underpinning risk.

Surgery is the treatment foundation

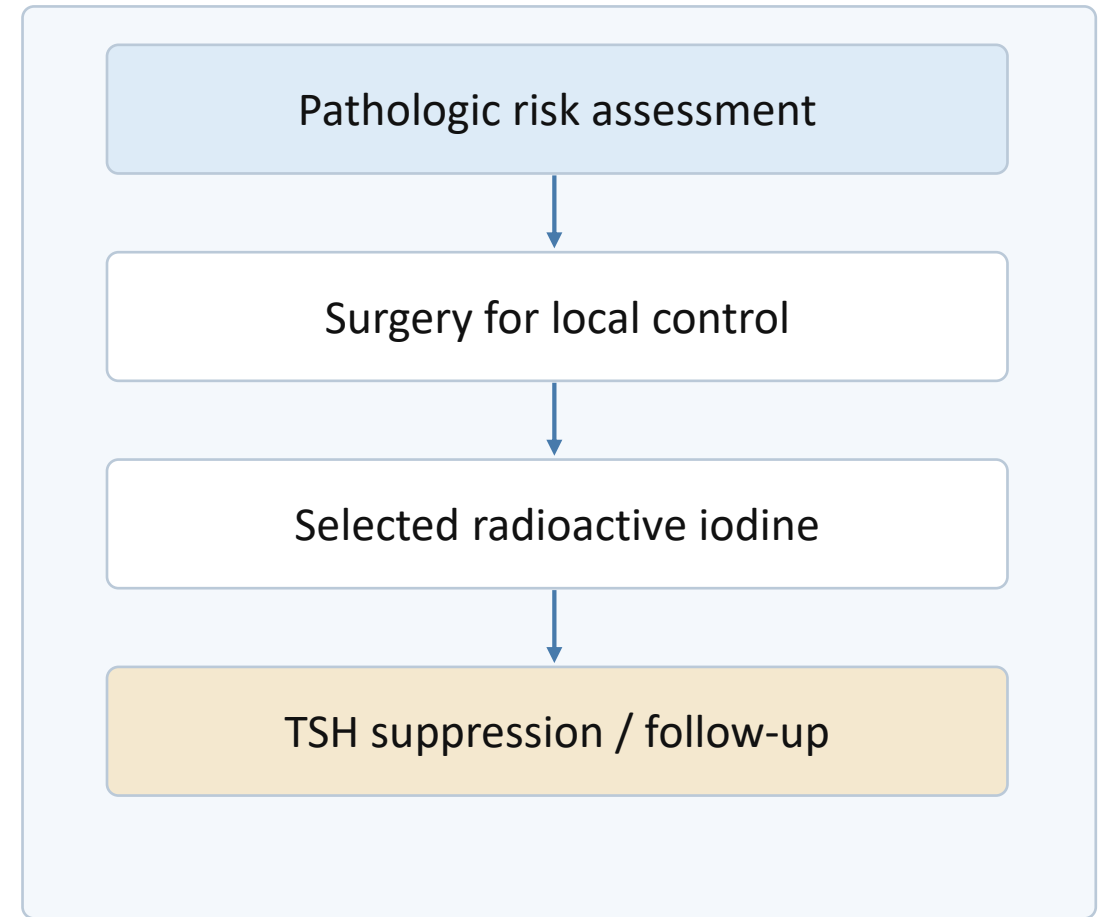
- Most cases in the source are managed by thyroidectomy, tailored to risk.
- Selected minimally invasive carcinomas have sufficiently low recurrence risk for less aggressive management.
- Surgical extent should not be decided from this deck alone.



Schematic

Radioactive iodine: Selected patients

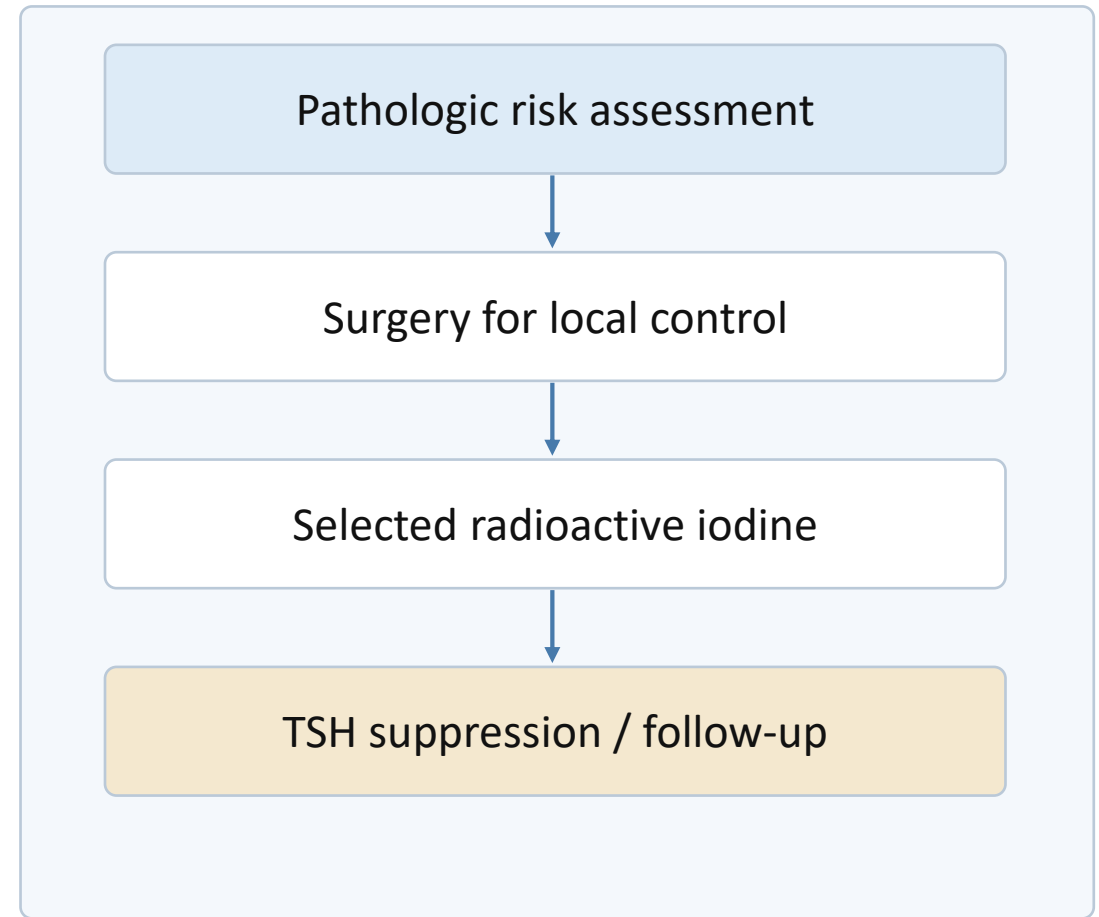
- After thyroidectomy, radioactive iodine may reveal metastatic disease.
- It can also ablate radioiodine-avid residual deposits.
- Use is risk-dependent and is not implied for every minimally invasive tumor.



Schematic

TSH suppression addresses stimulation

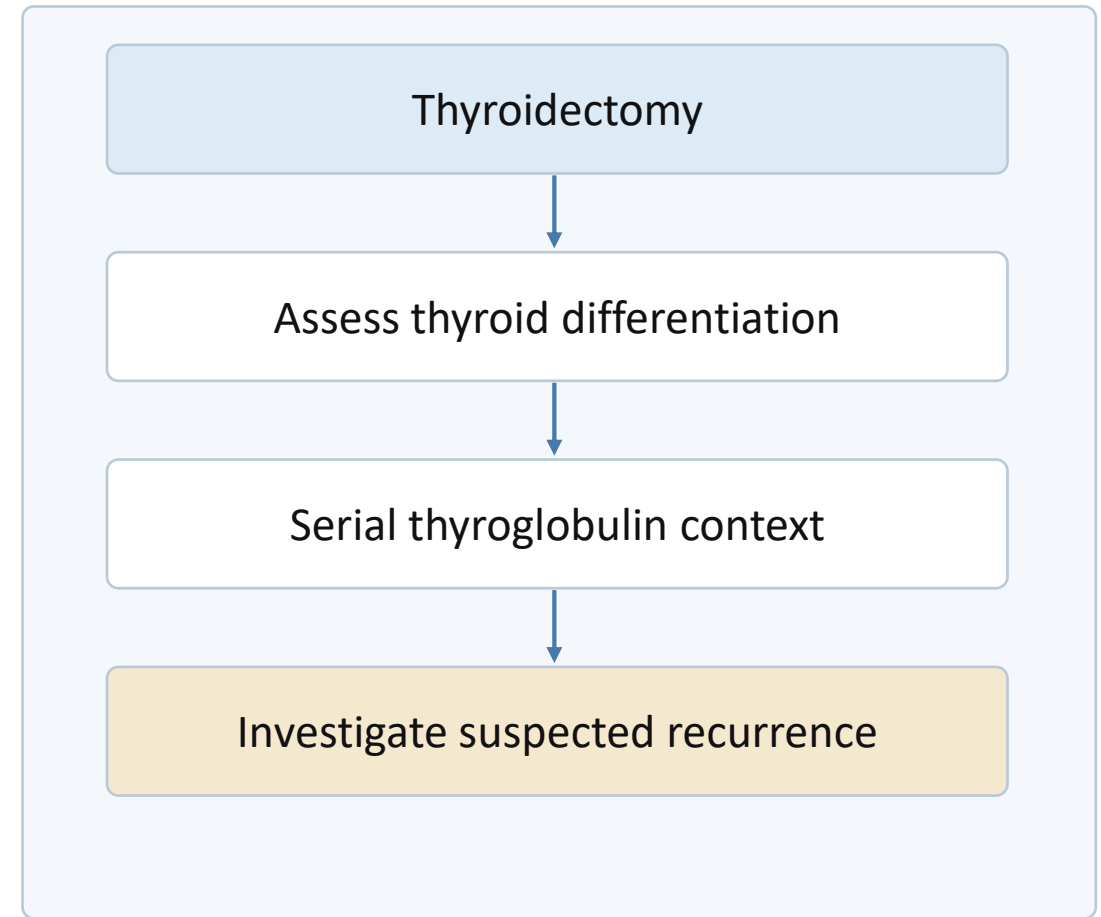
- Residual differentiated follicular carcinoma may respond to TSH.
- Thyroid hormone treatment can suppress endogenous TSH after surgery.
- The therapeutic rationale is reduced trophic stimulation of residual cells.



Schematic

Thyroglobulin in postoperative surveillance

- Thyroglobulin reflects thyroid follicular-cell differentiation.
- Following total thyroidectomy, a disease-free patient is expected to have very low thyroglobulin.
- Interpret surveillance in the context of treatment and clinical evaluation.



Schematic

Case 1 — a follicular aspirate

- A patient has a slowly enlarging, nonfunctioning thyroid nodule.
- FNA shows uniform follicular cells without PTC-type nuclei.
- Question: Can carcinoma be confirmed from this aspirate?

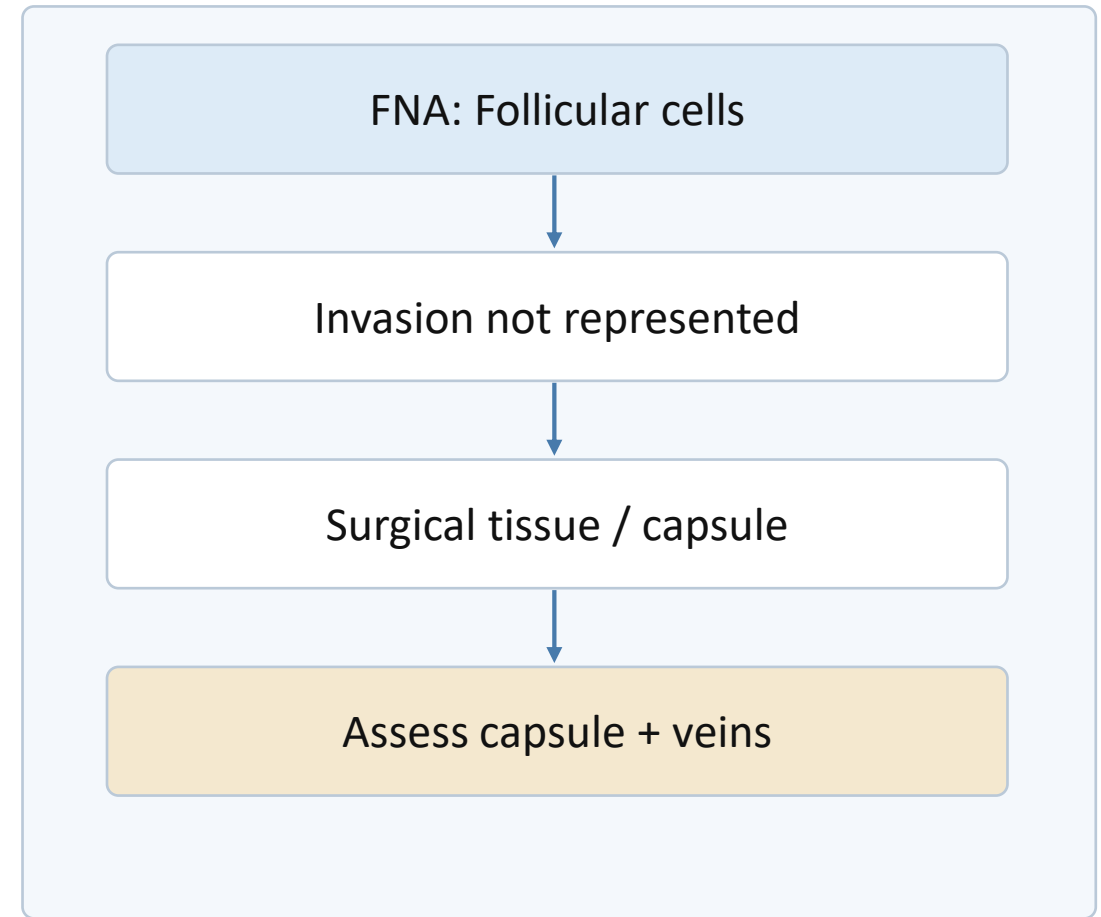
What is the decisive next inference?

Identify the finding that changes classification

Hypothetical educational case; No patient data

Case 1 — the missing information

- No: Cytology cannot establish the tumor–capsule interface.
- Adenoma and minimally invasive carcinoma may have indistinguishable aspirates.
- Tissue evaluation for capsular and vascular invasion is required.



Schematic

Case 2 — one microscopic breach

- An encapsulated follicular tumor has one confirmed focus crossing its capsule.
- Cells elsewhere look uniform and colloid-rich.
- Question: What makes this lesion malignant?

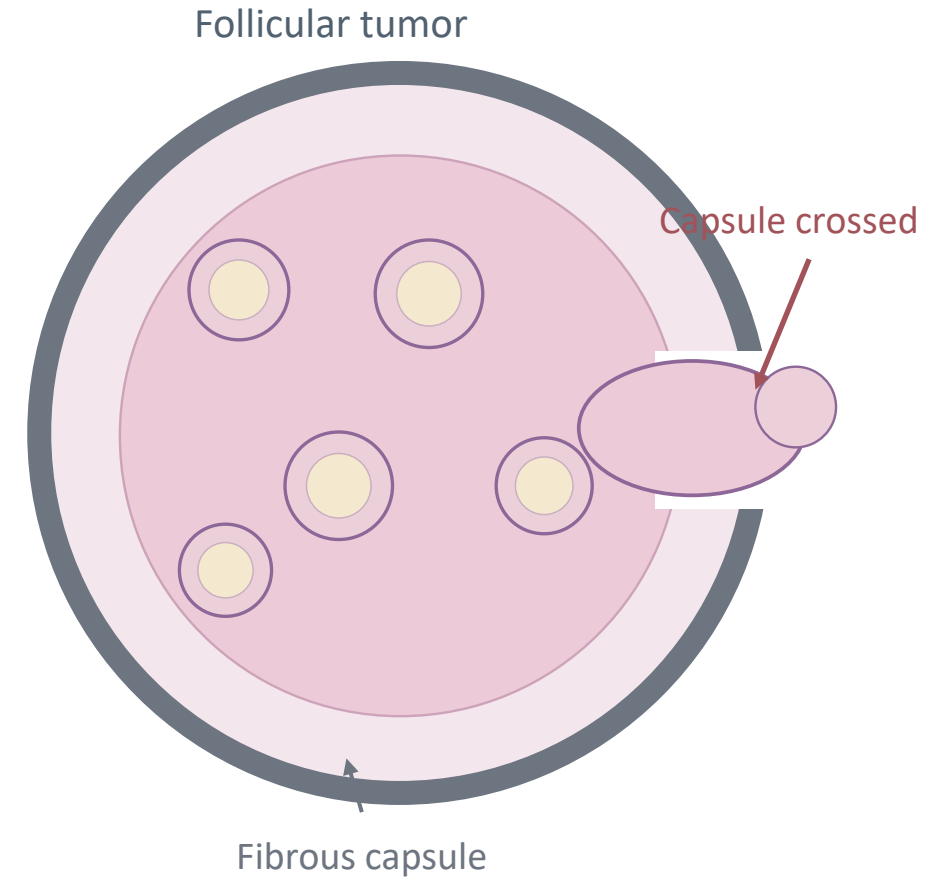
What is the decisive next inference?

Identify the finding that changes classification

Hypothetical educational case; No patient data

Case 2 — invasion overrides bland cytology

- Demonstrated capsular invasion establishes malignant behavior.
- The bland follicular architecture does not negate invasion.
- Document the location and extent of the confirmed invasive focus.



Schematic—capsular interface, not a histologic section

Case 3 — a bone lesion years later

- A treated patient develops a destructive bone lesion compatible with thyroid origin.
- A history of follicular carcinoma makes hematogenous spread biologically plausible.
- Question: Which initial histologic feature explains that route?

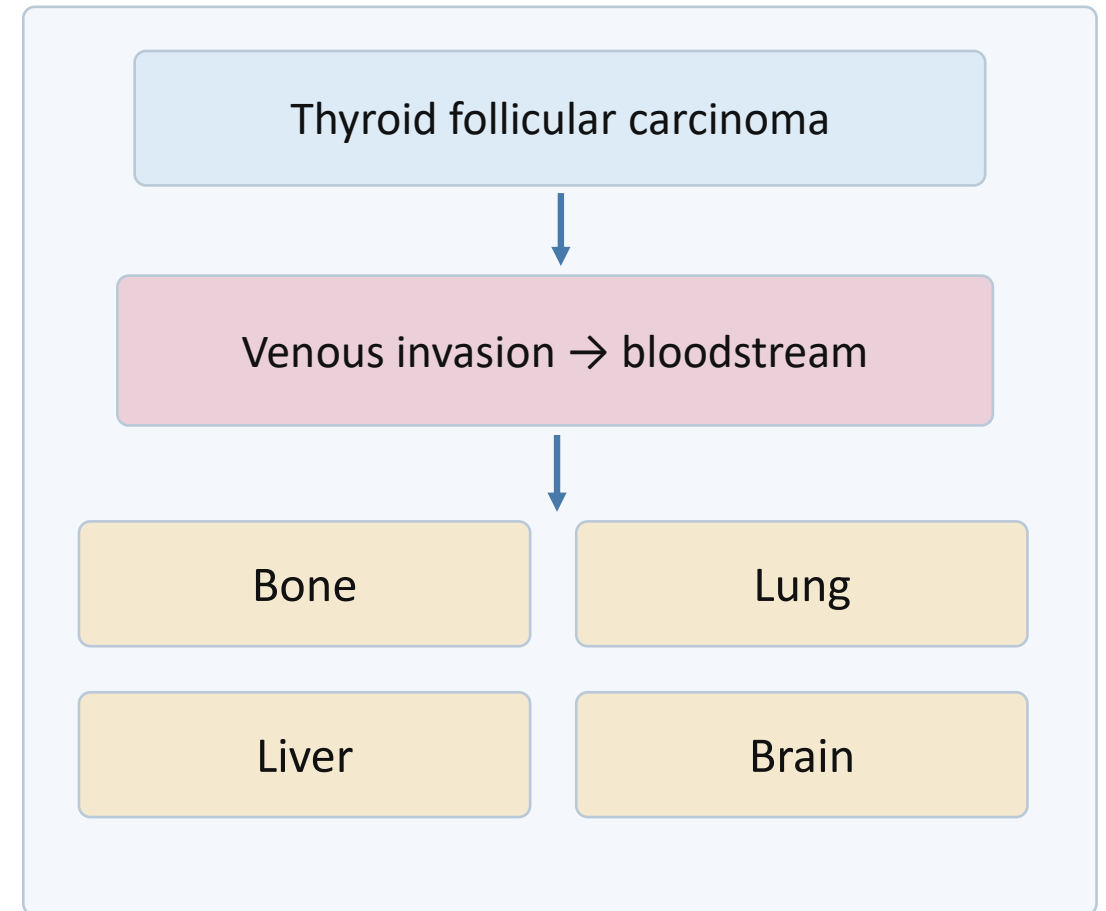
What is the decisive next inference?

Identify the finding that changes classification

Hypothetical educational case; No patient data

Case 3 — venous invasion links pathology to spread

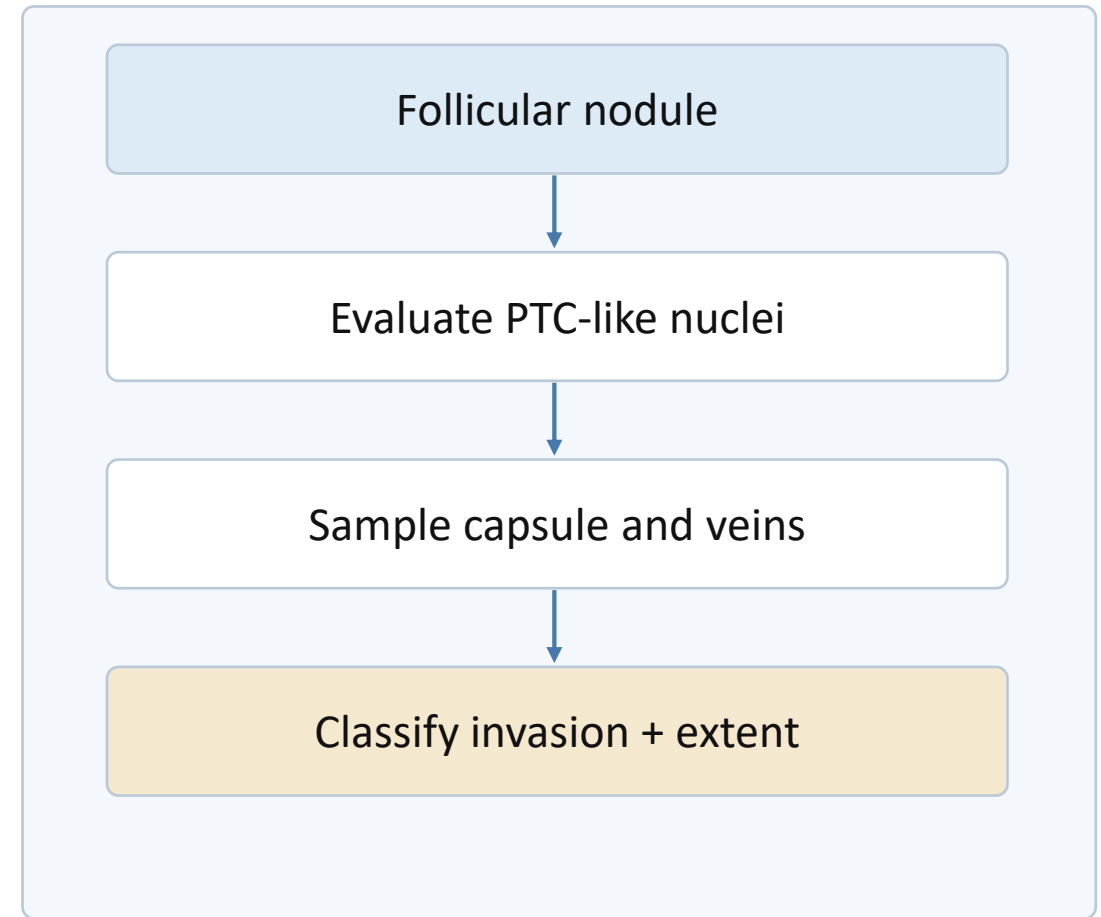
- Neoplastic entry into venous vessels enables distant dissemination.
- Bone and lung are characteristic systemic metastatic destinations.
- Regional lymph-node sparing cannot exclude distant involvement.



Schematic—hematogenous route; Not a measured risk model

Integrated diagnostic synthesis

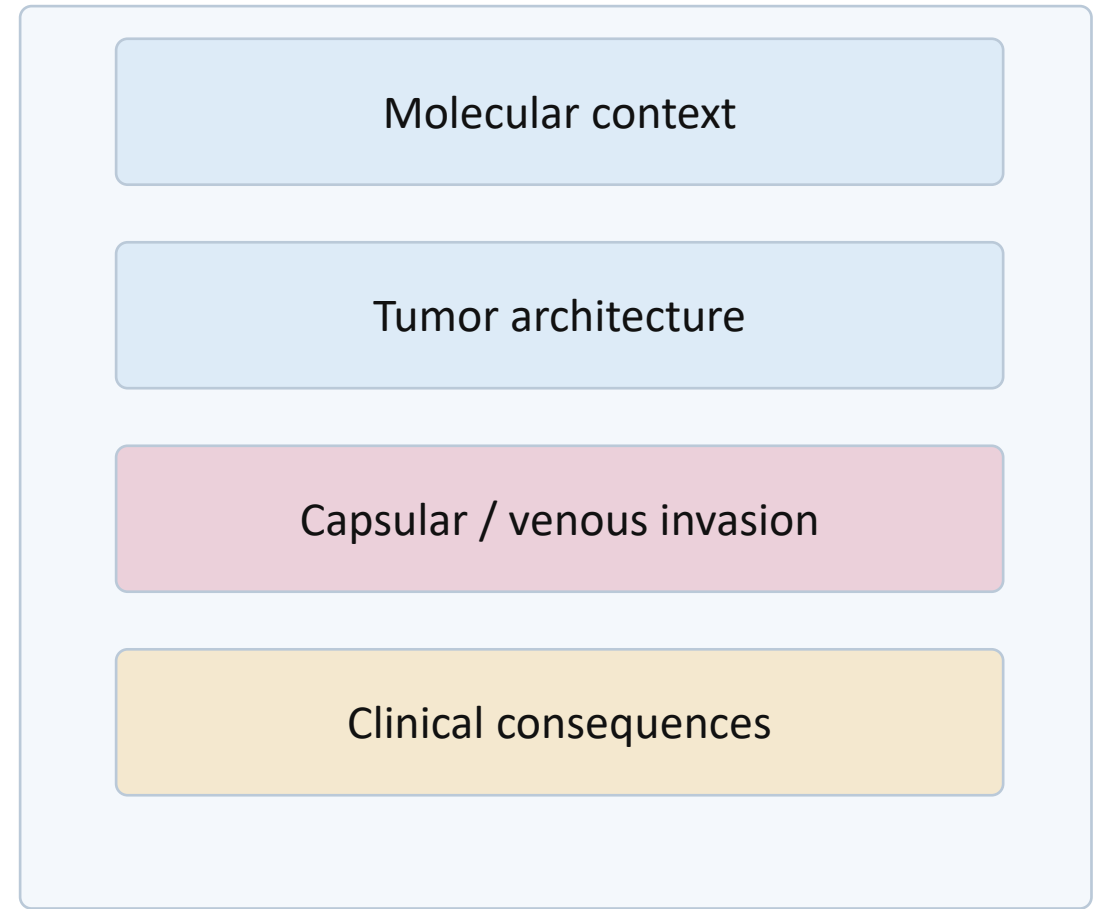
- Recognize follicular growth and evaluate nuclear phenotype.
- Sample the capsule and associated veins for definite invasion.
- Combine observed invasion, local extension, and stage for risk communication.



Schematic

Five points to retain

- Follicular carcinoma is diagnosed by invasion, not by bland follicular cytology.
- RAS-related molecular overlap does not prove malignant behavior.
- Capsular and venous interfaces require extensive sampling.
- Hematogenous spread, especially to bone or lung, is characteristic.
- Invasion extent and stage strongly influence prognosis.



Schematic