

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease that affects many people. Many people are frightened when they hear about cancer. This fear some times discourages people from becoming informed and doing what they can to help prevent cancer. Learning more about cancer is a way to cope with the fear of cancer.

Cancer is a group of many diseases that are due to abnormal functioning of the body cells. The human body is made up of billions of these tiny cells. These cells form all parts of the body, skin, bones, heart, lungs, and other organs. Normally, these cells reproduce themselves to support the growth and repair of the body parts.

When a cell begins reproducing or dividing without the normal order, pattern or purpose, we call this a tumor. A tumor may be benign (not cancerous) or malignant (cancerous). A benign tumor may grow larger, but it does not spread to other parts of the body. It may cause serious problems, a blockage or appear unusual, but it usually can be removed and does not grow back.

A malignant tumor is cancerous. The tumor invades nearby parts of the body. It can spread to other parts of the body forming new tumors (this is called metastasis). In a malignant tumor, the cells are growing completely out of control. In some cases, even when the original tumor is removed by surgery, the disease may continue to grow where it began or in other parts of the body if cancer cells already have spread.

What causes cancer?

Cancer occurs when there are changes in the part of the cell that controls reproduction or division of the cell. These changes can be caused by infection, like Hepatitis B, or by exposure to smoking. Scientists agree that people develop certain cancers through repeated or long term contact with one or more cancer causing substances called carcinogens. Carcinogens cause body cells to grow abnormally. Examples of carcinogens include some pesticides, radiation, chemical toxins, and tar in cigarettes. In addition, smoking cigarettes too much may cause you to have lung, throat or bladder cancer. For some cancers, such as colon, prostate, breast or brain the causes are not clear, and we do not know why patients with these types of cancer get the disease when other people do not.

Treatment of hepatitis (liver disease), avoiding sunburns, or quitting smoking will reduce the chance of getting cancer from these causes. Early testing (screening) to look for cancer early (when it is small and has not spread to other parts of the body) can allow for treatments which will cure the cancer, preventing death from cancer.

Some of the infections that may cause cancer can be contagious, but cancer itself is not contagious. You won't get cancer by being around someone who has cancer. Some types of cancer, like breast or colon cancers, run in the family. The risk of getting these types of cancer may be higher for you if other relatives in your family had that type of cancer before. You can help yourself by getting tested early for the types of cancers that are common in your family.

Warning signs of cancer include:

- ❖ Losing a lot of weight without trying
- ❖ A cough that won't go away and that is not TB
- ❖ Coughing blood, vomiting blood, or passing blood in the stool
- ❖ Blood coming from the vagina that is not menstruation
- ❖ Unusual changes in moles or skin
- ❖ Skin wound that will not heal
- ❖ Feeling very tired and weak without reason
- ❖ Lumps or growths
- ❖ Unexplained pain

Having these warning signs does not mean you have cancer. The signs may be caused by other things. If you have one or more of these signs, check with a doctor to know why.

Preventive health care and cancer treatment – Doing things to keep healthy

Preventive health care is very important. It is necessary to eat the right foods, exercise and pay attention to your body if you want to be healthy. It is also very important for you to see your doctor as soon as you find any of the cancer warning signs, or any other health problems. Your doctor may recommend a test to find cancer early before you have warning signs and, when a cancer is easier to cure.

Your doctor may find that you do not have cancer, but finding the disease at an early stage improves the chances of cure or control.

There are many different kinds of cancer. Some cancers are easier to treat than others. The treatment of cancer is improving. Old cancer treatments caused lots of side effects and were very difficult for patients. Now, there are many new and more effective cancer treatments. If cancer is found early, doctors can use these new treatments which are less troublesome and easier for patients. If cancer is found early, doctors have a better chance of successfully curing the cancer. Having cancer does not mean that you are fated to die from cancer, or that it is God's will that you die from cancer. People who have cancer can often be cured, so that they do not die from cancer. If you have cancer, do not give up. It is important to seek treatment because most cancers can be treated.

If you have questions about the information you see here, or if you want to learn more about cancer and early testing, contact your family doctor for an appointment. If you believe you may have some unusual signs and believe they represent early signs of cancer, you should make an appointment with your doctor.

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