

# Cancer

## What is cancer?

*Cancer* is an abnormal disorganised growth of cells in the tissues of a person. The cells multiply out of control and drain vital nutrition from the normal cells. A foetus growing in a mother's womb is a rapid growth of cells, but unlike cancer it is beautifully organised. Cancer is often referred to as a *growth*. There are two types of growth: *benign* and *malignant*. The benign type is more organised and not generally dangerous as opposed to malignant growth (cancer), which can spread from its original site to other areas of the body.

## Is cancer a single disease?

No. Cancer is a group or class of diseases that share the main feature of uncontrolled cell growth.

## What causes cancer?

Although we are able to identify several triggering factors (such as smoking for lung cancer, sunlight for skin cancer, and nuclear radiation for blood and other cancers), we still do not understand the how and why of what causes some cells to become malignant.

There is no hard evidence that cancer is contagious or is inherited, except for some rare cancers.

## How lethal is cancer?

Cancer is still a leading cause of death, accounting for about 1 in 8 deaths of people under 35 and 1 in every 4 deaths of those over 45.

## What are the common sites of cancer?

- *In men*: skin, lungs, prostate, bowel, kidneys, testes, bladder, stomach, pancreas.
- *In women*: skin, breast, bowel, lungs, reproductive organs, kidneys, bladder, stomach, pancreas.
- The 6 commonest causes of death from cancer in Australia are cancer of the bowel, lung, breast, prostate, lymphoma and pancreas.

## What are the main warning signs (common symptoms)?

- unusual bleeding or discharge
- a lump or thickening in the breast or elsewhere
- a sore that does not heal
- a change in bowel or bladder habits
- a persistent hoarseness or coughing
- persistent indigestion or difficulty in swallowing
- loss of weight
- a change in a wart or mole

## Do these symptoms or signs always mean cancer?

No, not always, but it is dangerous to ignore them because the earlier the treatment (if cancer is the cause) the greater the chance of recovery. Unusual bleeding should always be treated very seriously. If you have any of these listed symptoms or any trouble that persists longer than a month, see your doctor—to be on the safe side. It probably will not be cancer—but whatever it is should be cured!

## Is pain an early sign of cancer?

No, not usually. Pain is usually a very late symptom of cancer, when it has grown into the nerves. People often think that persistent pain such as headache and back pain means cancer, but this is rarely the case. However, pain should not be ignored.

## Can cancer be cured?

Once cancer has spread, cures are very exceptional, but many cancers if detected and treated early (before the malignant cells have spread) can usually be completely cured. The cure rate for many cancers is steadily improving, particularly cancer of the cervix, testes, skin, large bowel, lymph glands (lymphoma) and blood (leukaemia).

## What are the methods used to treat cancer?

There are many methods used to treat cancer, including surgery, chemotherapy (special drugs to destroy fast-growing cells), radiotherapy, laser therapy, cryotherapy and hormone therapy. The specialist will choose the most effective treatment for the particular cancer. It is best not to delay treatment while you try 'quack cures', but there is certainly a place for 'whole person' treatment. Some patients find benefit from meditation, good nutrition and vitamin therapy in addition to specialised treatment.

## How may cancer be prevented?

Some areas worth considering (based on studies of communities where cancer is rare) are:

- Do not smoke.
- Have a healthy diet including fruit, vegetables, cereal products and fish.
- Avoid exposure to harmful sun. (Use a hat, long sleeves and 'block out' lotion.)
- Be relaxed—avoid stress and anxiety; practise meditation.
- Avoid exposure to radioactivity and asbestos.

Other than this, screening measures for early detection include:

- 2-yearly Pap smears up to the age of 70
- regular mammography for women over 50
- regular breast or testicular self-examination
- bowel examination for those at risk
- regular inspection of the skin