
Cancer — Early Detection is the Best Protection

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is cancer?

Cancer isn't one disease. It's a name that is used for more than 100 different diseases. It can affect almost every organ of the body. Cancers are usually named after the place in which they begin. That's why you hear the terms lung cancer, skin cancer, prostate cancer, breast cancer and so on.

All cancers start in the cells of your body. Normally, the cells in your body's tissues grow and reproduce themselves in a controlled manner, on order from the genes in each cell. When these orders get mixed up, the cells grow abnormally. In time, abnormal cells form lumps or tumours. Not all tumours are cancerous, they can be "benign" (non-cancerous). If they are cancerous, they are called "malignant" tumours. When cells of malignant tumours break away and enter the blood stream or your body's lymph system, the cancer can then spread to other tissues and organs.

What causes cancer?

No one knows yet why some cells divide and grow uncontrollably. But it is clear that cancer is caused by a complex mix of heredity, lifestyle and cancer-causing substances called carcinogens.

Some people are born with a cancer gene in the cells of their body — a gene they have inherited from a family member. If they have, they might be more likely to develop cancer. However, inheriting a cancer gene doesn't

necessarily mean that you will develop cancer : only 5 to 10 per cent of cancers are hereditary. It does mean, however, that you should tell your doctor that there is cancer in your family so that you can be screened and tested appropriately.

How many people get cancer?

One in three Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. It is the second leading cause of death in our country. However, because of improved screening tests, the availability of more information, and better treatment more than half of those who get cancer will survive it.

What's the difference between "primary" and "secondary" cancers ?

The original cancer growths are called "primary." If the primary cancer (such as breast cancer) spreads to another site (such as the lymph nodes) the cancer in this site is called a "secondary" cancer. You will sometimes hear the terms "metastasize" used in reference to cancer : this simply refers to the spreading of the cancer from a primary to a secondary site.

Can anything be done to prevent getting cancer?

It's clear that the kind of lifestyle you live does have an effect on your risk of getting cancer. People who do not smoke, eat healthily, exercise regularly and don't get too much sun or exposure to other environmental factors, are less likely to develop cancer. So : eat a healthy diet (lots of fruit and vegetables and high-fibre, lower-fat foods); maintain a healthy body weight; reduce the amount of alcohol you drink to two or less drinks a day; get regular physical activity; don't smoke; and avoid direct sunlight.

The other thing to do is to inform your doctor of any history of cancer in your family and report any unusual swellings or lumps or other uncharacteristic changes to your overall health.

Early detection can make a big difference to the successful treatment of cancer.

What are the symptoms of cancer?

Symptoms depend on the type of cancer. You might suffer severe pain in cancerous areas. Organs might not work properly. Sometimes, symptoms such as high blood pressure, low blood sugar and diarrhea are caused by a cancer. Complications of cancer can make it hard for people to breathe or can cause the veins in the chest or neck to swell. There are many other symptoms. You should always discuss any unusual changes in your health or body with your doctor.

How is cancer diagnosed?

If your doctor suspects that you might have a cancer, he/she will send you to an oncologist – a cancer specialist. The oncologist will probably examine you physically, ask you

about and evaluate your symptoms, and get blood tests and x-rays.

The only way to really tell whether cells are cancerous, however, is to take a tissue sample. This is called a biopsy. The cells are examined under a microscope. The doctor can then generally tell what type of cancer is present and what "stage" it has reached (the size of tumour is and how far the cancer has spread). It's important to detect what stage the cancer has reached because this will help the oncologist decide the prognosis – the prospect of recovery – and the type of treatment he/she will recommend.

How is cancer treated?

Treatment depends on the type of cancer and the stage it has reached. You and your team of healthcare professionals will decide together what treatment is best for you.

Treatment can include surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and, for some cancers, hormones or hormone-blocking radiation. The goal of all treatment is to kill cancerous cells while killing as few healthy cells as possible.

Surgery is used to try and remove cancer cells that are packed together. Sometimes the surgeon will remove normal cells around the cancerous cells or tumours to see if the cancer has spread or not.

Radiation therapy often follows surgery. It can take a number of different forms. It is used to kill any remaining cancer cells. The side effects of radiation are the result of healthy tissue being destroyed. They usually go away once radiation therapy is completed.

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs. It is usually used when it's difficult to find the exact location of the tumour and/or when the

cancer has spread into the bloodstream. A combination of different drugs is usually prescribed.

Certain types of cancer, such as breast cancer, are influenced by hormones. These cancers are treated with hormones or hormone-blocking medications to slow their growth. Hormone therapy consists of a pill, or injection, which shrinks the tumour.

Finding out that you have cancer can be very distressing for you, your family and your friends. Because healthcare professionals recognize that you need emotional support before, during and after treatment, they can direct you to organizations that can help you during this stressful time.

Where can I get more information?

The best way to get healthy is to get informed. There are many health information sources available to you including:

Government of Ontario

For information about health services and resources :
www.health.gov.on.ca

For consumer-friendly health tips and information :
www.HealthyOntario.com

INFOline: 1-877-234-4343;
TTY: 1-800-387-5559

Telehealth Ontario:
1-866-797-0000; TTY 1-866-797-0007

INFOline is open during business hours and can provide general information on healthcare.

Telehealth Ontario is a 24/7 service which uses nurse practitioners to answer your immediate health concerns.

Some other sources

Cancer Care Ontario
Tel : 416-971-9800
Web : www.cancercare.on.ca

Canadian Cancer Society
Tel : 416-488-5400; 1-800-268-8874
Web : www.cancer.ca

Ontario Breast Screening Program
For Ontario women age 50 and over
Tel : 1-800-668-9304
Web : http://www.cancercare.on.ca/prevention_breastScreening.htm