
Cancer

What is Cancer?

Cancer is not one particular disease but rather a group of diseases. Similar to all cancers is the irregular growth of abnormal cells. Instead of maintaining an orderly pattern of growth, begin to grow rapidly, abnormally and without restraint. Normal cells grow and divide in an orderly fashion and respect the boundaries of neighbouring cells. A cancer usually develops from a normal cell that has changed or mutated because of a virus, chemical, radiation, family predisposition or lifestyle factors such as smoking.

A cancer can be either benign or malignant. A benign tumour grows slowly and is contained within a capsule of fibrous connective tissue. They grow by expansion and compress other tissues but do not invade or metastasise to other tissues.

Malignant tumours grow rapidly and invade the surrounding tissue destroying healthy tissue. They are able to metastasise or spread from the primary site to other regions of the body and form a secondary tumour. Malignant tumours are poorly differentiated which means they do not resemble the original tissue they arose from and do not function properly.

Diagnosis

Most people feel overwhelmed when they learn they have cancer. Reactions differ from one person to another. Often people don't remember anything after the diagnosis of cancer. Your caree's and your own feelings are part of the process of coming to terms with the illness. Family and friends often need as much support and guidance in coping with their feelings as your caree and you do.

Many different emotions arise which can cause confusion and frequent changes of mood:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and uncertainty
- Denial
- Blame and guilt
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Depression
- Learning to cope

Treatments

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be given by mouth or intravenous injection. Drugs taken by mouth are usually taken over several days. Drugs given by injection usually require one or more injections and can be given twice a day, daily or as infrequently as once a week. The total course of Chemotherapy, made up of several short courses, will take four to eighteen months or even longer, depending on the extent of the disease and how well it is responding to the drugs.

The side effects of chemotherapy are many and varied and individuals may react differently to the same treatment. Most side effects are only temporary, and usually disappear shortly after the treatment stops. However, some side effects are permanent.

Some of the more common side effects include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Loss of appetite and/or change in sense of taste
- Hair loss
- Mouth sores
- Itchy skin or other skin problems
- Swelling or puffiness
- Bowel problems
- Sexuality or fertility problems
- Easily tired and increased susceptibility to infection

Surgery

Surgery is used to remove the tumour and often if the tumour is completely resected and there has been no spread this can prevent the cancer from reoccurring. Normally the lymph nodes which drain fluid from the organ are also removed because this is the first place a cancer spreads to. Surgery is often used in combination with radiation to either shrink the tumour for better removal or to eliminate any cancerous cells that may have been missed. Whether or not surgery is used is not determined by the severity of the cancer but rather the best approach to treat it.

Surgery can also be used to obtain biopsies or samples of the tumour for diagnosis and to alleviate symptoms associated with the tumour, for example, removing an obstructed bowel.

Radiotherapy

Short wave radiation that is able to penetrate the body's tissues is used for the treatment of cancers. X rays and gamma rays are used and are directed at the tumour site. Cancerous cells are fast growing and dividing and are affected most by radiation but an excessive amount can also damage normal cells.

Radiotherapy is normally given in small doses spaced apart rather than a single large dose. Well nourished, cancerous cells on the outside of the tumour are more susceptible to radiation and are destroyed first. Nutrients can then diffuse into the tumour and enrich cells that were previously deficient making them more susceptible to the next dose of radiation.

If a cure is not possible, radiation can be used to relieve symptoms. It can help with bone pain, ulceration and bleeding.

Complementary Therapies

There are many good treatments that complement medical care but likewise there are many that are questionable. Complementary treatments that may be of benefit include nutrition, acupuncture, massage, exercise, relaxation and other methods that you may choose to help you manage the disease and its effects.

Practical Suggestions for Coping with Side Effects of Treatment

If your caree feels sick with the treatments, they could try any of the following suggestions:

- Eat smaller amounts more often
- Eat slowly and chew food well to help the food to be better digested
- Eat the main meal at the time of day when they feel best
- Avoid eating fatty things
- Eat dry toast or crackers
- Drink clear, cool and unsweetened drinks like diluted apple juice
- Don't do anything too strenuous after a meal, try not to lie down for at least two hours after a meal
- If cooking or cooking smells make them feel sick, prepare meals between treatments and freeze them.
- Try different foods until you find something that they want to eat. Try drinking special liquid supplement foods that you can get from your pharmacist.
- Talk to a dietitian if diet or weight gain becomes a problem.

Let them take things easy. They should do less than they normally do, and only what they feel comfortable doing.

If hair does fallout, it is likely to do so quite quickly. It takes about 4-12 months to grow back a full head of hair. They may wish to get a wig fitted before hair loss starts and get their own haircut shorter so that it fits better under a wig. The government will help to pay the cost of a wig.

Encourage them to keep teeth, gums and mouth very clean during treatment to help stop infections.

If they get diarrhoea they could try these ideas:

- Drinking between meals to replace lost fluids
- Eating small frequent meals
- Avoiding seeds, pips and skins in fruit, vegetables and grains
- Avoiding cow's milk

If they are constipated they could try the following:

- Drinking at least 6-8 cups of fluid each day
- Eating regular meals and not missing breakfast
- Adding extra fibre to food

They may feel sexually unattractive or not feel like having sex. Perhaps they will feel more like touching or cuddling. They may become infertile during treatment, which could either be temporary or permanent. The use of contraceptives during treatment is advised as there is a slight risk of miscarriage or birth defects for children conceived during treatment.

How to Best Care for Someone with Cancer

Become informed: Find out about their medical condition so you can make sensibly plans. You may need guidance regarding bathing and other nursing tasks.

Listen: Listen carefully to what they want and need. They are still the same person but they now require extra support.

Acknowledge the illness: They may be frightened by the diagnosis or feel lonely, angry or depressed. They will need an understanding listener. Don't ignore the illness. Acknowledge it and let them talk about their concerns if they want to.

Offer practical help: It is better to make a specific offer to help rather than just asking "May I help?" you could offer to mow the lawns, prepare meals or take them to their treatment

Cancer varies from one person to another and it is not always possible to predict how it will progress.

Where to go for Support

The Cancer Society

The Cancer Society offers patient and family support services giving you a time to share your concerns with professional staff and trained volunteers. They have support groups for specific cancer sufferers. They offer a patient driving service to treatment centers and accommodation for patients living outside of Christchurch.

Also available is the John Wilson Library and Information Service and internet access with links to reputable cancer sites.

The Cancer Society promotes health and community education, offers research and education grants into cancer research.

For more information phone 03 379 5835

Caring for Carers

Joining a carer support group can relieve some of the stress you are under as a carer. The constant tasks, the concerns, grief, drama, moments of joy, frustration and exhaustion are all part of the day to day existence of a carer.

Feelings of helplessness, fear, anger, guilt and despair are all normal. It is important that the carer has an outlet for these feelings, like having someone to talk to. The chance to share with others who understand and are also, or have been carers lightens the load and may be all that is needed. *Caring for Carers* provides support to carers by providing a way to communicate feelings that it would not be appropriate to discuss with friends, family or the caree.

Caring for Carers has a Newsletter and several support meetings each month and ongoing telephone support. These services are provided to help make your job easier.

Caring for Carers is situated:

4th floor, Securities House
221 Gloucester Street, Christchurch.
Postal address: P O Box 13 167, Christchurch
Phone: 377 8426
Fax: 377 8420
Email: caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz