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De-mystifying Cancer

by Stuart Wolfe

*A Guide to Prevention, Symptoms,
Treatment and Hope*

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About the Author

Stuart Wolfe is a person whose family has been touched by cancer, like most Americans, friends and other relatives who have had various kinds of cancer.

He needed to know more about the current state of knowledge of cancer, its effects and recommended treatments. Now, he has put what he found into this ebook.

He feels that this material has helped him to deal with his family and friends who suffer from cancer and also been helpful to their close family and friends.

Stuart emphasizes that he is not an expert, just a lay person with some knowledge and experiences that can help other people to cope with the disease and help those close to them.

He hopes that you will find this material useful and benefit from it.

Part-I: Introduction

1. Cancer – An Overview

Cancer is a deadly disease and one of the leading causes for death in developed countries. Cancer can affect people across all age groups, although it is predominant in the elderly. Cancer develops due to an unrestricted and uncontrollable division of body cells. Normal body cells grow, divide, and die systematically. Cancerous cells follow no set pattern. These cells form, develop, and spread anywhere and at any rate too. These cells outlive normal cells and thereby cause harm to body organs and their functioning.

Types of Cancer

There are numerous types of cancer. You can arrive at a proper diagnosis only after a pathologist conducts a histological examination of specific tissue. A biopsy or surgery can help doctors obtain such tissue. A thorough examination of such tissue can detect the presence of specific type of cancer.

How Cancer Starts

Your body consists of innumerable small cells. These cells are the living units and control all your body functions. All these cells contain DNA. These cells grow, divide, and die according to set patterns. They conform to strict regulations. However, changes in the DNA structure of any single cell can cause drastic changes in this set pattern.

Mutations in DNA structure of your cells could happen due to many reasons. This causes changes in the organized working of your body cells. Cells start growing and dividing without any control or system.

Such uncontrolled division can lead to growth and development of tumors. Tumors are an accumulation of such diseased cells.

Tumors can be benign or malignant. Benign tumors do not spread and are not cancerous. Malignant tumors are cancerous and spread to different body parts. Sometimes, you can contract cancer through organ transplants. Tumors remain within the transplanted organs and start creating problems after transplantation.

Symptoms of Cancer

There are three predominant groups of cancer symptoms. Although these are generalized symptoms, occurrence or presence of such symptoms may or may not cause cancer.

These are:

1. **Metastasis symptoms:** These cancerous symptoms arise due to continued spreading and multiplication of cancerous cells. Common symptoms include enlarged liver, enlarged lymph nodes, pain in the bones, fracture of affected bones, and other neurological symptoms.
2. **Local Symptoms:** These symptoms include excessive and unusual swellings like tumors, pain, bleeding and internal hemorrhage, and compression of tissues leading to jaundice.
3. **Systemic symptoms:** Active cancer in your body could cause continued weight loss, lack of appetite, anemia, excessive sweating and night sweats, and striking hormonal changes too.

How Cancer Develops

DNA damage is the predominant cause for cancer. Such damage causes mutations in the genes. These genes are responsible for controlling cell division through proper regulation of proteins. A single mutation to DNA cannot and does not result in the development of cancer. It is necessary for many mutations to take place before a normal cell will transform into a malignant cell.

Mutations occur due to various reasons like viruses inserting their DNA into your genome, or radiation, or the presence of carcinogenic chemicals or physical agents, and other causes.

Mutations can pass from one cell generation to the other. Cancer can also occur due to excessive exposure to specific factors like alcohol, tobacco, certain viruses, and others.

Appearance of Cancerous Tissues

Cancerous tissue has a distinct appearance under the microscope. You can easily distinguish a cancerous tissue from a normal tissue. Striking features include differences in cell sizes and shapes, numerous dividing cells, absence of specific cell features, lack of normal tissue organization, absence of definite tumor margin, and other similar factors.

Microscopic examination and later biopsy can reveal if specific cells are cancerous. Sometimes, cells continue to grow and divide at an excessive rate. However, these may not be cancerous. Such cell division is according to a set pattern. This is hyperplasia and it is possible to reverse the situation too.

Although cancer is not hereditary, there are instances of heredity related cancer occurrences. Certain inherited mutations cause

ovarian cancer and breast cancer. Retinoblastoma is an example of inherited cancer in young children. Endocrine tumors, brain tumors, and colon cancers are examples of such inherited cancers.

Prevention of Cancer

Cancer prevention centers on simple remedial measures. You can make small changes in your lifestyle and restrict exposure to cancer risks like smoking, alcohol consumption, and controlling body weight. Nevertheless, smoking and alcohol consumption do not necessarily cause cancer, as statistics indicate otherwise. More than twenty percent of women and ten percent of men developed lung cancer without smoking.

Restricting body weight and being physically active can prevent the incidence of cancer. Occupational and chemical exposures and infectious agents also cause cancer. Although studies indicate a link between diet and the occurrence of cancer, there is no conclusive evidence of any specific diet leading to the incidence of cancer. Different types of cancer are prominent in different parts of the globe. Immigrants face exposure to such risks in a new country and therefore could develop cancer.

Treatment

Not all cancers are fatal. It is possible to treat and cure cancer. Normal treatment options for cancer include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, and medications. All treatment options cause many side effects too.

Cancer treatment depends on the extent of damage in your body. In some cases, doctors prefer to remove diseased organs to arrest further spread of cancer in your body. There is no single cure or

treatment option for cancer as a whole. Recent research has been able to detect a cure for specific types of cancer. If untreated, cancer can lead to imminent death.

Part-II: Understanding Cancer

2. What is Cancer?

Cancer is fast evolving as one of the major causes of death.

Estimates say that more than half of the male population and one-third of the female population in the United States will develop cancer sometime in their lives. It therefore becomes imperative to understand what cancer is.

What is Cancer?

Your body consists of millions of small cells. Cells are the smallest biological units of every living being. Normal cells grow, divide, stop growing at a specific time, and die too. All such processes take place systematically and in accordance with your biological constitution.

However, at times, certain abnormal cells start growing at an alarming rate. These are cancerous cells. These cells do not follow any pattern and keep on growing. They divide uncontrollably and do not die. Normally, such abnormal cells accumulate together to form a lump or a tumor. These cells destroy other healthy cells within your body and hamper the normal functioning of body organs. Resultantly, you feel sick.

How Do Cancer Cells Develop?

Every cell contains DNA, which regulates cell activities and body functioning. If DNA in your body cells suffers damages due to smoking or other causes, your body is unable to repair this damage. Many a time, this leads to the formation and development of cancerous cells. You can inherit damaged DNA and thereby inherit cancerous cells too.

Certain cancers like leukemia do not form tumors or groups of cells. It circulates in your body using your blood as a medium. It forms and develops cancerous tissues in different parts of your body too. Irrespective of where it spreads, cancer takes the name of its origin. Therefore, leukemia is blood cancer and remains so even if it causes cancer in the liver or the stomach.

Spread of Cancer

Cancerous cells do not follow any particular pattern. Sometimes, cancerous cells break away from their original lump and form new lumps at different parts of your body. This is metastasis. This process continues and leads to the spread of cancer.

When you are young, the growing and division of normal cells is rapid in your body. As you grow into an adult, such growing of cells stops. Your body cells grow and divide only if you injure yourself and require new cells to replace damaged or worn-out cells.

However, abnormal cells keep on growing and often outlive normal cells. Such growth can be benign or malignant. Benign growth is non-cancerous and does not spread. You can remove these cells too. Malignant growth is cancerous and dangerous.

Cancerous cells in different parts of your body behave and react differently. Their response to treatment also differs. Hence, it is essential to diagnose prevalent cancer correctly and thereafter administer suitable treatment. Early diagnosis and treatment can ensure fast recovery.

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