

up are you?

Who gets cancer?

Cancer can occur at any age, but the older you are the more the risk increases. Around 64% of all newly diagnosed cancers occur in people aged 65 years or older and some cancers are more common than others. In SA, cancer of the breast, cervix, uterus, colon/rectum and oesophagus are most common in women and cancer of the prostate, lung, oesophagus, colon/rectum and bladder are most common in men.

How can it kill?

Not all cancers kill – some have survival rates of more than 90% – and cancer caught at an early stage isn't life-threatening. Some interfere with the body's vital functions, blocking the digestive system, for example. Some can take over an organ, such as the lung, causing it to collapse. If it reaches the liver or bones, it upsets the body's delicate chemical balance. Many treatments can control cancer, even if they can't actually cure it. But if a cancer continues to grow, then it can become too much for the body to cope with.

Which cancers are hereditary?

Scientists have discovered that breast, bowel, ovarian and womb cancers might run in families. But only about 5%–10% of cancer is hereditary.

Why does cancer affect people differently?

Most of us, sadly, know someone who has died from cancer, but many survive it. 'This is because different types of cancer can behave differently,' explains Ledwick. 'Also, the stage (how big it is and whether it has spread) and grade (how quickly the cancer cells are dividing) of the cancer when it's diagnosed can influence whether it's curable. If a cancer is diagnosed early, treatment is much more likely to be successful.'

Can a healthy lifestyle really make a difference?

'There seems to be growing evidence that diet and lifestyle play a role in many cancers,' says Dr Russ Hargreaves. 'We all know the proven dangers of smoking and lung cancer. We also know that obesity is linked to colorectal cancer and, for example, increasing our numbers of sexual partners increases the risk of cervical cancer (due largely to the transmission of viruses).' Professor Apffelstaedt adds, 'Breast cancer is

one of the few cancers where risk is not increased due to smoking.'

Are some cancers 'better' than others?

'Lymphoma and testicular cancer have excellent survival rates, even when the cancer is widespread,' explains Dr Hargreaves. 'But other cancers are more difficult to treat, such as lung and pancreas cancer, partly because they are deep within the body, so it's often late when a patient experiences symptoms.'

Why do some cancers cause pain and why are some inoperable?

Cancer causes pain by pressing on organs and nerves as it grows. If it's small, or not pressing on anything, it may not cause pain. 'Whether you can operate depends on where the cancer is, how big it is and whether it has spread,' explains Ledwick. 'If cancer has spread, or is growing into vital organs, it may not be possible to remove it. In these circumstances an operation won't help.'

Scientists say not smoking and maintaining a healthy weight are the most important habits to prevent cancer

When is the 'all-clear' given?

For most cancers, once you have got to five years from diagnosis, your risk of developing cancer is the same as anyone else's.

Signs to look for

FOR WOMEN AND MEN

- ◆ An unusual lump or swelling on your body.
- ◆ A change in the size, shape or colour of a mole.
- ◆ A sore that won't heal after several weeks.
- ◆ A mouth or tongue ulcer that lasts for longer than three weeks.
- ◆ Cough or croaky voice that lasts for longer than three weeks.
- ◆ Persistent difficulty swallowing or indigestion.
- ◆ Problems passing urine.
- ◆ Blood in your urine.
- ◆ Blood in bowel motions.
- ◆ More frequent bowel motions than usual.
- ◆ Unexplained weight loss or heavy night sweats.
- ◆ An unexplained pain that lasts longer than four weeks.

FOR WOMEN

- ◆ An unusual breast change.
- ◆ Bleeding from the vagina after the menopause or between your periods.

Help and advice

◆ The Wendy Appelbaum Institute for Women's Health in Joburg is a one-stop treatment facility with a well-coordinated team for women suffering from different forms of cancer. Wendy is passionate about the early detection of breast, ovarian and cervical cancers, in order to improve the

survival rate of women who contract the disease. Call 011 356 6205/6 for more info.

◆ The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) website is full of tips, info, support, research findings and coping mechanisms for the cancer patient and their families. Call 011 616 7662 or visit cansa.org.za.

5 TOP TIPS TO ENSURE AN OPTIMAL MAMMOGRAM

Set aside the notion that mammograms are often regarded as an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience. They're an essential tool in detecting early breast cancer.

Professor Apffelstaedt suggests the following when scheduling your annual mammogram:

- ◆ Use a facility specialising in mammography and ask whether they offer full field digital mammography.
- ◆ Go to the same facility regularly so your mammograms can be compared year on year.
- ◆ If you change to a different facility, take your previous mammogram films to the new facility so they may be compared to the new mammograms that will be taken.
- ◆ If you have sensitive breasts, try having your mammogram the week after your period.
- ◆ Do not wear deodorant, talcum powder, lotions or cream under your arms or on your breasts on the day of your mammogram as they may interfere with the quality of the mammogram image.