

# WORLD CANCER DAY

4 February 2023



Cancer is a complex, life-threatening disease which affects millions of South Africans. Cancer is any malignant growth or tumour caused by abnormal and uncontrolled cell division. If not stopped, it may spread to other parts of the body through the lymphatic system or blood stream. While scary, we must not lose hope! Cancer survival is improving and has doubled in the last 40 years.

Cancer survival varies between cancer types, ranging from 98% for testicular cancer to just 1% for pancreatic cancer. Many of the most commonly diagnosed cancers have ten-year survival of 50% or more (2010-11) and more than 80% of people diagnosed with cancer types which are easier to diagnose and/or treat, survive their cancer for ten years or more (2010-11). Interestingly, cancer survival is higher in women than men.

## TYPES OF CANCER

There are **over two hundred different kinds of cancer**.

Some cancers are named after the part of the body where the cancer or tumour originates.

Some cancers affect areas such as glands or blood, such as lymphoma (cancer of the lymphatic system) and leukemia (cancer of the blood).



## CANCER SIGNS and SYMPTOMS

Detecting cancer early is one of the most powerful ways we can help save lives. With so many different types of cancers, the symptoms are varied. Yet, there are key signs and symptoms to look out for.

- **Fatigue**, extreme tiredness, and a severe lack of energy.
- **Unusual lumps or swelling**, which are often painless and may increase in size.
- **New mole or changes to a mole** in terms of size, shape, or colour and if it becomes crusty or bleeds or oozes.
- **Persistent coughing**, breathlessness, or difficulty swallowing.
- **Unexplained or ongoing pain** or pain that comes and goes.
- **Changes in bowel habits** e.g., constipation, diarrhea and/or blood found in the stools.
- **Unusual breast changes** in size, shape or feel, skin changes or pain.
- **Needing to urinate urgently**, more frequently, or being unable to go when you need to or experiencing pain.
- **Feeling less hungry** than usual for a prolonged period of time.
- **Unexpected bleeding** including from the vagina, anal passage, or while urinating or when coughing.
- **A spot, sore, wound or mouth ulcer that won't heal.**
- **Unexplained and unintentional weight loss** over a short period.
- **Persistent or painful heartburn** or indigestion.
- **Heavy, drenching night sweats.**
- If you experience any of the signs and symptoms, **don't be afraid to seek medical advice urgently.**

## WHY DO PEOPLE GET CANCER?

It is difficult to know why certain people get cancer, and others don't. Doctors use the term risk factors; things that damage the cells so they can grow into tumours.

### Risk factors include:

- **Smoking cigarettes** or using tobacco products like hookah pipes, e-cigarettes, snuff, pipe or chewing tobacco.
- **Having been sunburned often.**
- **Some viruses:** HIV, HPV and Hepatitis B virus
- **Unhealthy lifestyle;** being overweight, limited physical exercise, alcohol, too many sugars and red meat, not enough vegetables, and fruit.
- **Inheritance:** a family history of cancer (some of your close relatives e.g., father, mother, brothers, or sisters) have had cancer: breast, bowel, melanoma, and ovarian cancer).
- **Pollution, and toxins** in the environment (dirty air and water, smoke, and chemicals that we breathe in).

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GO TO A DOCTOR WHEN YOU NOTICE SYMPTOMS?

Many people recover from cancer every year, completely or temporary. Doing so is easier when cancers are diagnosed at an early stage as treatment is often simpler and more likely to be effective. So, finding cancer can make a real difference.

Sometimes, people put off seeing their doctor because they're worried about what the doctor might find. But it's important to remember that advances in the way cancer is diagnosed and treated have led to real improvements over the years. The earlier, the better!



# TREATMENT OF CANCER

**The three most common types of treatment** for cancer are surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy.

**Surgery** - a cancer tumour that has not spread can be removed. This is done by a surgeon during an operation. The tumour and sometimes some more tissue is taken out. Sometimes it is followed by radiotherapy.

**Chemotherapy** - not all cancers can be cut out, that's when the doctors use medicines like chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is the use of strong drugs to kill cancer cells. It is often called "chemo." If the disease has spread in the body, or it is likely to spread, chemotherapy drugs are used. There are more types of chemotherapy, depending on the type of cancer, the stage of cancer and the patient. Chemotherapy travels through the blood vessels and destroys the cancer cells. You can get chemotherapy as a drip, as pills or as an injection. Sometimes chemo is the only treatment plan given, but often it is given before or after surgery, or together with radiotherapy.



**Hormone therapy** - sometimes the doctor prescribes pills that you have to take for a long time after the treatment is finished. This is to stop cancer cells from starting to grow again. Hormones can also be given as a monthly injection or drip.

**Radiation** - uses high-powered energy beams, such as X-rays or protons, to kill cancer cells. Radiation treatment can come from a machine outside your body (external beam radiation), or it can be placed inside your body (brachytherapy).

There are also many different newer types of treatment being developed everyday.



## HOW DOES THE DOCTOR DECIDE WHAT TREATMENT IS BEST FOR ME?

The doctor will consider a number of different things before he chooses the best way to treat your cancer:

1. What type of cancer you have.
2. How big the cancer tumour is.
3. How fast the cancer is growing.
4. Whether cancer has spread to other parts of your body, and if so, where it has spread to and how far it has grown in these other places.
5. Your age, symptoms, and general health.

Doctors use a lot of information to help plan treatment. Although each person's situation is different, cancers with the same stage tend to have similar outlooks and are often treated the same way.

## Outcomes

Many people want to know their chance of surviving after a diagnosis of cancer. Your doctor is the best person to ask. A prognosis is your doctor's best estimate of how cancer will affect you and how it will respond to treatment.

Prognostic and predictive factors are used to help develop a treatment plan and predict the outcome.

- A prognostic factor is a feature of the cancer (like the size of the tumour) or a characteristic of the person (like their age) that may affect the outcome.
- A predictive factor can help predict if a cancer will respond to a certain treatment. Some drugs only work if molecules (such as proteins) are on cancer cells or inside them.

Your doctor will also consider survival statistics for your type of cancer. Only a doctor familiar with all of these factors can put the information together to arrive at a prognosis. Ask your doctor about the factors that affect your prognosis and what they mean for you. Also, remember that a prognosis can change over time because cancer does not always do what it is expected to do.

**Generally, the earlier cancer is found and treated, the better the outcome.**

Platinum Health (PH) offers a comprehensive Cancer and Oncology Programme to its members. If you are diagnosed with cancer and once PH has approved your cancer treatment, you are covered by the programme. It is important to contact Platinum Health's Case Management team as they will not only assist you with registering on the programme, but they will guide you through your treatment plan every step of the way.

For more information or assistance, kindly contact Case Management:  
Telephone: 014 590 1700 or 080 000 6942  
Fax: 086 233 2406 or 086 247 9497  
Email: [plathealth@platinumhealth.co.za](mailto:plathealth@platinumhealth.co.za)



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