

CANCER MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Health and Fitness

Cancer is perhaps the most widely discussed disease today. We hear about it on television, read about it in the newspaper, participate in support walks, and give donations from our hearts. It has touched the life of virtually everyone, whether directly or through a loved one, colleague or friend. So, it is surprising to find that in our info-saturated society, there are still many myths and misconceptions that abound.

Consider some of these common myths:

Myth: Cancer is contagious.

Fact: Cancer is the result of chromosome damage, and is therefore not communicable. One cannot “catch” cancer by touching, hugging or being near a patient. As one time, when little was known about its cause, people would shy away from a cancer patient in fear of bringing the disease upon themselves. At a time when support, love and understanding were needed most, cancer patients were left isolated and alone.

Myth: It is an elderly disease.

Fact: Cancer can occur at any age. About 40% of all cancer cases occur in those under age 65. Some cancers, such as Hodgkin’s and testicular, target the young. This is why it is important to be aware of physical changes, symptoms and lumps at any age.

Myth: All cancers are inherited.

Fact: While it is true that having a first-degree relative, i.e. mother, father, sister, brother, with cancer increases your own risk, it does not automatically guarantee that one will develop the same. Certain cancers do prevail in some families – breast or colon cancers are good examples – however cancer can also occur without any family history.

Myth: Injuries can cause cancer.

Fact: Cuts, bruises, broken bones, etc., do not cause cancer. For instance, bruises or hits to the breast will not cause breast cancer, nor will broken bones cause bone cancer. Injuries may bring a heightened awareness of those areas, making one more conscious of any future symptoms, and therefore diagnosis.

Myth: Stress causes cancer

Fact: Although stress has been suspected as a risk factor in addictions, obesity, high blood pressure, peptic ulcer, colitis, asthma, insomnia, migraine headaches, lower back pain, physiological disorders and a weakened immunity system, a connection to the development of cancer has not been proven at this time.

Myth: Cancer is always painful

Fact: Some cancers do not even cause pain. Others may produce pain only in the later stages. That’s why it is important for those who suspect a problem to see their physician.

Myth: Cancer patients will become addicted to pain medication

Fact: Medication that is properly used will not cause addiction.

Myth: A diagnosis of cancer is the “kiss of death.”

Fact: Many forms of cancer can be definitively treated or controlled. According to the American Cancer Society, there are approximately 8 million Americans living with a history of cancer.

Myth: External radiation treatments make one radioactive.

Fact: External radiation therapy will not cause one to become radioactive. The body does not act like a battery, storing and emitting the radiation. When the linear accelerator is shut off, the radiation ceases. There is no need to restrain from having contact, such as hugging, kissing, touching or sexual relations, with someone receiving treatment.

Patients who have received prostate seed implants are advised to not have small children sit on their laps, or come into contact with pregnant women during the first couple of months following their procedure.

Myth: All treatments have the same side effects, such as losing hair, nausea, vomiting.

Fact: The type of treatment and area being treated will determine the side effects. For instance, radiation patients will lose hair only in the area being treated. Also, not everyone will experience the same side effects to the same degree.

Myth: Radiation treatment is painful.

Fact: As with a x-ray, one will not feel the radiation being administered. Also, today's technology enables the radiation oncologist to minimize damage to spare healthy tissue by precisely focusing the treatment to the tumor area.

Myth: Chemo is one drug

Fact: Chemotherapy involves a wide range of chemicals, dosages and combinations. Different combinations may be used for specific cancers.

Myth: Surgery causes cancer to spread by exposing it to air.

Fact: Exposure to air does not cause cancer spread. Surgery is used to remove cancerous cells from the body. During surgery, it may be determined that the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes, requiring their removal as well.

Sometimes, additional surgery is performed to remove cancers that have already spread to other parts of the body, or to remove a cancer that has reoccurred at the original site. All of these may lend to the myth of surgery causing the spread of cancer.