

## **Cancer: Awareness, Prevention & Natural Therapies**

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### **Cancer Statistics:**

Cancer accounts for nearly one-quarter of deaths in the United States, exceeded only by that due to heart diseases. In 2005, there were 559,312 cancer deaths in the United States. Currently it is estimated that about 1.4 million new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in 2008. Overall, cancer death rates are higher in men than women in every racial and ethnic group. African American men and women have higher rates of cancer mortality than their counterparts in every other racial and ethnic group. Asian American and Pacific Islander men and women have the lowest cancer death rates, about half the rate of African American men and women, respectively.

Cancers of the prostate and breast will be the most frequently diagnosed cancers in men and women, followed by lung and colorectal cancers in both men and in women. Lung cancer is currently the most common cause of cancer death in women, with the death rate more than two times what it was 27 years ago. In comparison, breast cancer death rates were virtually unchanged between 1930 and 1990, but decreased about 27% between 1990 to 2004. The death rates for stomach and uterine cancers have decreased steadily since 1930. Colorectal cancer death rates have been decreasing for the past 50 years due in large part to screening procedures.

Despite a continuing decline in the cancer death rate from 2004 to 2005, the recorded number of cancer deaths increased by 3,592 in men and 1,832 in women, resulting in a total increase of 5,424 cancer deaths. The incidence of cancer among children ages 0-14 years has been increasing

slightly, by about 0.6% per year, since 1975. Cancer-related mortality in children ages 0-14 has been stable since 1998 after decreasing steadily from 1975 to 1998 by 2.9% per year.

**Awareness:**

Awareness of one's risk factors for development of cancer is important from a prevention standpoint. A risk factor is defined as anything that increases a person's chance of getting a disease. Some risk factors such as diet, nutrition and exposures to toxic materials can be changed, and others such as genetic predispositions to developing cancer cannot. Risk factors for cancer can include a person's age, sex, and family medical history. Growing older increases one's risk of cancer because of environmental and age-related factors. Use of tobacco significantly increases the risk of cancer, not only for lung cancer but others as well. Exposure to excessive amounts of sunlight without proper skin care, also increases the risk. Ionizing radiation, a variety of chemicals, certain hormones, and some viruses and bacteria round out the list of common risk factors. Excess alcohol intake, poor diet and a lack of exercise also contribute. One or more risk factors may be needed to develop cancer. High levels of stress, while not directly identified as a risk factor, certainly plays a role in lowering immune system function, which also contributes.

Having a risk factor for cancer means that a person is more likely to develop the disease at some point in their lives. However, having one or more risk factors does not necessarily mean that a person will get cancer. Some people with one or more risk factors never develop the disease, while

other people who do develop cancer have no apparent risk factors. Additionally, even when a person who has a risk factor or factors is diagnosed with cancer, it is often difficult to prove that the risk factor actually caused the cancer. Statistically however, persons who develop cancer have the corresponding risk factors more often than not. Regardless of whether someone has or does not have the necessary risk factors, screening for cancer should be an on-going process as its development poses a significant social, familial and economic burden.

### **Warning Signs:**

There are a number of cancer warning signs that everyone should be aware of. These are also known as the 7 warning signs of cancer.

1. Any unusual bleeding or discharge such as blood in the urine or stool or a discharge from the breast or penis.
2. A sore which does not heal or doesn't seem to be getting better over time. A sore that becomes more painful, is starting to bleed or becomes bigger.
3. Any change in bowel or bladder habits such as becoming constipated or looser than normal stools. If there is a change in color, consistency, shape of the stool or if blood is noted, these should be brought to the attention of your physician.
4. A lump or growth noted in the breast or other part of the body such as the scrotum, axilla, inguinal region, or neck.

5. A nagging or persistent cough or a change in ones voice or development of hoarseness

6. An obvious change in a mole. The ABCD rule will help you determine if changes have occurred.

- **Asymmetry:** Does the mole look the same in all parts or are there differences?
- **Border:** Are the borders sharp or ragged?
- **Color:** What are the colors seen in the mole?
- **Diameter:** Is the mole bigger than a pencil eraser (6 mm)?

7. Difficulty in swallowing. Is there a feeling of pressure in throat or chest which makes swallowing uncomfortable or feeling a fullness without food or with a small amount of food.

While not considered a “Warning Sign” patients often will present with a sense of unease or be worried about the presence of cancer. These feelings should never be dismissed by the physician but addressed as excessive worry and stress can lead to a lower immune system function that may allow cancer or other illnesses to develop.

**Prevention:**

Prevention of cancer begins with recognizing ones risk factors and addressing them before they become problematic. While there is a plethora of information regarding cancer, its risk factors and prevention available, it is often difficult for patients to develop and implement a prevention plan. In part this is because there is so much information available that it is often

difficult to sort out. Therefore, developing a prevention plan with a knowledgeable health care worker can be immensely beneficial.

Some of the areas that naturopathic medicine focuses on are diet and nutrition, exercise, and proper use of antioxidant therapy to lower ones risk. The link between diet and nutrition and cancer development is well known. People who consume high calorie and fat diets have higher rates of cancer compared to those who do not. Statistical evidence shows that those who consume fresh fruits and vegetables, eat a low fat and moderate carbohydrate and adequate protein diet, and are not excessively over weight, have lower cancer rates.

The American Cancer Society recommends that individuals eat five or more servings of vegetables and fruits a day for cancer prevention. Fruit and vegetable consumption have been linked to lower rates of cancers of the mouth and pharynx, esophagus, lung, stomach, and colon and rectum. Nationally however, there has been little improvement in consumption of these beneficial foods since the mid-1990s, and less than one in four adults was consuming the recommended servings in 2005.

Exercise also has been shown in numerous studies to be of benefit in the prevention and treatment of most diseases. Participation in physical activity has been consistently associated with a reduced risk of developing cancer, particularly breast and colon cancer. In general, cancer rates are lower in people who exercise on a regular basis, and clinically seem to be beneficial in those undergoing cancer therapy. Even though the exact mechanism of how exercise reduces cancer risk isn't known, researchers believe that physical activity's effects on factors including hormone levels, immune function, and body weight may play an important role. Additionally it is thought that the benefits of higher oxygen delivery to the body also

plays a role as cancer cells have difficulty living in high oxygen environments.

Addressing ones level of stress also helps to prevent cancer. High stress levels affect cortisol levels which in turn affect immune system function. Patients who are chronically maladapted to stressors are found to suffer from more frequent illnesses.

### **Natural Therapies:**

There are a wide variety of natural treatments for cancer available, each reporting varying degrees of success. Many patients with cancer choose to pursue natural therapies in conjunction with conventional treatments. It has been our experience that patients undergoing conventional treatments such as chemotherapy and/or radiation fare better when natural therapies are employed at the same time.

For certain types of cancers, natural therapies have been shown to be effective whereas for others, it hasn't fared much better than conventional methods. This is because despite the type of cancer, the individual who is afflicted reacts differently than someone else with the same diagnosis. Therefore, treatments must be highly individualized in order for them to be more effective.

### **Natural Medicine As Adjunctive Therapy:**

In patients undergoing standard regimens of chemotherapy and/or radiation, natural medicines used concurrently provide relief from the side effects of conventional treatments. While in theory chemotherapy and radiation affect the cancer cells more than healthy cells, healthy cells are affected in much the same manner. The use of antioxidants, high dose

Vitamin C infusions, constitutional hydrotherapy, and homeopathic prescriptions to combat nausea and vomiting has been shown to be beneficial.

A number of studies have shown that patient's who undergo natural therapies while having chemotherapy and/or radiation, have better outcomes. Not only do they handle the side effects of the therapy better, but also patient response to them is much improved. In other words, the likelihood of a successful response to conventional treatments increases.

Once conventional cancer therapies have been completed, the patient's immune system is also compromised. Left on its own to recuperate, it often takes a considerable period of time to make a recovery, and then it is often an incomplete one. The most critical period following cancer therapy that allows for the possibility of its recurrence is within the first 5 years. Therefore, a rapid recovery of immune function is highly desirable in order to catch any cancer cells that have escaped previous therapies.

There are a number of natural medicine protocols to restore immune system function which have been shown clinically to be beneficial. Redevelopment of the battered immune system must occur before any further immune therapy is undertaken in order to prevent recurrence of the cancer. Immune therapy targets cancer cells but must have a healthy immune system to do so. Clinically, patients' who undergo treatment to restore their immune system fare better with 5-year survival rates than those who do not. In addition to the immune system, restorative therapies also benefit other organ systems such as the liver, kidneys, thyroid, and the gastrointestinal tract.

**Natural Medicine As Primary Cancer Therapy:**

A number of patients choose to utilize natural therapies in the treatment of cancer over conventional ones. The decision to do so should not be taken lightly and consultation with an experienced naturopathic physician should be pursued so that all options can be weighed. Unfortunately some patients choose to begin natural therapies on their own based upon a recommendation or what they have read on the Internet.

There are overabundances of natural therapies available to choose from. The problem with this is that not all of the therapies are beneficial for the type of cancer being treated, and, utilizing many different therapies at the same time can actually be detrimental. Some natural therapies can actually be suppressive while others may, after a time, become ineffectual or feed the cancer.

A person's response to the development of cancer, their response to therapy, and their ability to recover are highly individual. Therefore, the therapy undertaken must be designed for the individual patient and not for the type of cancer encountered. As we are unique individuals, a particular therapy may not be good for everyone despite the testimonials as to its effectiveness. Therefore, consultation with an experienced naturopathic physician can help sort through the many options so that those chosen can provide maximum benefit.

Our experience with cancer therapy, be it adjunct or primary, is that it must constantly be monitored and readjusted as the patient progresses through it. The growth of cancer cells is often chaotic and unpredictable and therefore the treatments should constantly be monitored and adjusted. This is one of the reasons we vary our prescriptions so that we can keep the cancer on edge, never allowing it to adapt.

As with any therapy, the most important aspect of it is; is the patient responding appropriately in a manner that is beneficial? Pursuing a single therapeutic protocol over a long period of time may not be beneficial in the long term. Certainly with any cancer therapy this is extremely important as things can change quickly which necessitates a change in the therapeutic protocol. Therefore, it is important that patients and their physicians maintain communication as to how therapy is progressing and make the necessary changes when needed.