



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Cancer Overview

To understand cancer, we need to first understand normal cell growth. Throughout life, body cells divide and duplicate in an orderly fashion. This growth is rapid during the early years of life. But when the body is fully grown, normal cells of most tissues divide and duplicate only to replace worn-out cells and to repair injuries.

However, cells sometimes abnormally divide and duplicate in an uncontrolled and rapid manner. The excess tissue that is formed is called a "tumor." Tumors can be quite harmless or quite dangerous. When the renegade cells multiply but do not spread, they are considered to be harmless and are described as being "benign." When the renegade cells multiply and invade nearby tissues and spread to other parts of the body, they must be considered dangerous and are described as being "cancerous," or "malignant." Cancer, then, is simply a general term that refers to the malignant tumors that invade tissues and spread through the lymph system or bloodstream to other parts of the body. Once the cancer spreads, it's said to have "metastasized."

In general, the risk of cancer increases with age. The majority of cancers occur after the age of 40. But cancer does occur in younger people and, though rare, cancer is the leading cause of death from disease in children ages 1 through 14.

Although there is no known way to guarantee protection against cancer, there are ways to reduce your risk of getting it. Here are five suggestions from the American Cancer Society:

- 1.) Don't smoke. Tobacco causes over one-fifth of all cancer in the United States. Not smoking reduces your risk significantly.
- 2.) Avoid overexposure to the sun, and wear sunscreen on all exposed parts of your skin when you're outdoors. This will help decrease the risk of skin cancer.
- 3.) Limit your exposure to automobile fumes, factory exhausts, household solvents, and lawn and garden chemicals. Some may contain cancer-causing agents.
- 4.) Cut down on smoked and fatty foods. These may contribute to some types of cancer.
- 5.) Control your weight. Excess weight increases the risk of cancer.

If you are mindful of all of these precautions, you can significantly reduce your risk of getting one of the many forms of cancer. However, you should still be on the lookout for any signs of cancer, since early treatment can often mean the difference between life and death. Therefore, you should call your health care professional if you have any of the following seven symptoms:

- 1.) unusual bleeding or discharge from any body opening;

- 2.) a lump or thickening in the breast or elsewhere;
- 3.) a sore that doesn't heal;
- 4.) a persistent change in bowel or bladder habits;
- 5.) a persistent hoarseness or cough;
- 6.) a persistent indigestion or difficulty in swallowing;
- 7.) a change in a wart or mole.

Usually, these signs do not indicate cancer, but only your health care professional can tell for sure, so you should report them promptly.

As mentioned, treatment of cancer is most successful when the malignancy is detected and treated early. There are three basic types of treatment: surgery, radiation, or drugs—also called chemotherapy. The recommended treatment depends on the type of cancer and the extent (or "stage") of the cancer. Sometimes, combinations of these different treatments are used. New cancer treatments are always being evaluated, and many patients with cancer may be offered the possibility of participating in a trial of a new therapy.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at www.kaiserpermanente.org/california, then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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