

Staying alert to combat lymphoma



The lack of specific symptoms for lymphoma system makes staying alert crucial in fighting this common form of cancer.

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Lymphoma is one of the ten most common cancers in Hong Kong and yet public awareness of this disease is relatively low. It occurs in the lymphatic system which drains lymph throughout the body and plays a crucial role in helping to fight infection and disease.

However, symptoms are not specific, occur in different parts of the body and often very similar to those of more common illnesses such as the cold. As a result diagnosis is often delayed and it is not usual for people only to seek help when the symptoms persist over a long period of time or when swellings occur in the lymph nodes in areas like the neck, armpit and groin area.

Types of lymphoma

Lymphoma is not one single cancer and can be divided into two main types: Hodgkin Lymphoma (HL) and Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma (NHL).

NHL is the most common type, accounting for around 800 cases of newly diagnosed cancer cases in 2012 according to the Hong Kong Cancer Registry.

It can be aggressive or indolent. In its aggressive form, tumors can grow rapidly within just a few weeks. However, it can be cured completely if diagnosed and treated early.

Treatment of the indolent type is mainly through drugs to control the symptoms and delay spreading.

Hodgkin Lymphoma is the less common and accounts for only 20 per cent, or one in five, of all lymphomas diagnosed.

However, treatment is usually successful in curing or controlling the condition for many years.

Spotting symptoms

Like all cancers, early diagnosis is crucial in treating lymphoma successfully and it is important patients do not suffer in silence and consult their doctor as soon as possible if they experience symptoms.

The most common symptom is swollen lymph glands, especially in the neck, armpit or groin (i.e. inner thigh). However as there is no pain, many people do not suspect lymphoma, even when they find small lumps.

Also as the lymphatic system runs throughout the body, the symptoms can be related to the organ closest to the position of the primary lymphoma. For example, when the tumor is in the lymph nodes within the chest,

patients may experience chest pain or breathing difficulty. However, these can also be symptoms of many other benign diseases which may initially deter patients from seeking medical advice.

Pay attention to your body

Checking your body for lumps regularly, for example while bathing, can help detect lymphoma early. If sustained or growing lumps are found in the neck, armpits and groin, you should seek medical advice immediately.

Even if you do not detect any lumps, you should also seek medical advice if you experience the following symptoms persistently:

- fever;
- excessive sweating, especially at night;
- weight loss.

Stay positive

In addition to early detection, an accurate pathologic diagnosis is crucial if treatment is to be effective. This will include using advanced equipment such as CT (computed tomography) or PET (positron emission tomography) to determine the size, location, and the stage of the lymphoma.

A biopsy (tissue test) will also be carried out to determine the type of lymphoma, to allow the oncologist to decide on the most appropriate treatment.

Unlike other cancers, surgery is seldom used as a treatment option for lymphoma. Instead, treatment is more likely to include chemotherapy and targeted drug therapy.

These may be used together or singularly depending on the situation. If necessary, radiation therapy may also be used to achieve the optimal results.

As with all forms of cancer, regular follow-up appointments and checking are required after treatment and a balanced diet, regular exercise and maintaining a positive attitude are important in preventing a recurrence.

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