

SCMA health watch

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Health Tips from South Carolina's Doctors

WHAT IS CANCER?

DEFINITIONS OF CANCER

Cancer—a large number of diseases from the different tissues of the human body. All organs are made up of cells. Cancer is the development and spread of abnormal cells that exhibit uncontrolled or poorly controlled growth.

Tumor—a mass of tissue related to an organ or organs in the human body.

Benign—refers to a non-cancerous tumor or growth. It can be of fairly large size but does not usually invade other tissue.

Malignant—refers to cancerous growth. Abnormal cells in an organ system that can invade blood vessels, lymph vessels and surrounding normal tissue with potential to spread to distant areas.

Metastasis—the malignant spread of cancer to other sites, either near or far away when transported through the circulatory or immune system or by direct extension into surrounding tissue.

MOST COMMON CANCERS

- Skin
- Lung
- Colon
- Breast
- Prostate

SCREENING TESTS

Tests that are done for the most common types of cancer on a regular basis in an attempt to prevent or find cancer early so that it can be treated most effectively. Screening tests include but are not limited to regular physical exams, chest x-rays, mammograms, checking for blood in stools, colonoscopy, Pap smears, and prostate exams.

PREVENTION OF CANCER

- Primary prevention: healthy diet, exercise, weight control and avoid nicotine
- Secondary prevention: detect cancer as early as possible—screening tests
- Tertiary prevention: palliative care (providing relief of pain)

DIAGNOSIS OF CANCER

The methods of diagnosis (finding out about) cancer include taking a history from the patient about abnormal symptoms, physical examination for unusual findings and diagnostic tests which can include blood tests, x-ray or imaging studies and tissue sampling.

TREATMENT OF CANCER

Diagnostic—a method of treatment to establish the diagnosis of cancer. This includes taking samples of cells to study under a microscope by a pathologist. The samples can be taken by scraping the surface, performing a needle biopsy, or an incisional or excisional biopsy.

Therapeutic—a method of treatment used to try to cure or alleviate the problems of cancer growth. The most common methods of treatment are:

1. **Surgical**—to attempt to remove all cancerous tissue without impairing function
2. **Radiation**—either externally radiate or implant radioactive material in the area
3. **Chemotherapy**—to give medicines which have specific ability to halt or decrease the growth of cancer cells. This can be administered orally, by IV or topically to the area involved.

TREATMENT RISKS

All treatment methods have effects on the tissues involved or the patient's well-being. Side effects can include nausea, vomiting, hair loss, loss of some body function or any number of other findings. Before agreeing to any method of treatment, you should discuss options of treatment as well as any commonly experienced side effects you may have.

Did you Know?

- Lung cancer is the leading cause of death in South Carolina, accounting for 29 percent of all cancer deaths from 1996-2001.
- Colorectal Cancer is the fourth most common cancer diagnosed in South Carolina
- Prostate cancer accounts for 30 percent of all male cancer cases in South Carolina

Sources: DHEC, 2006 A Report on the Health of South Carolina's People and Environment, SC Central Cancer Registry, South Carolina Cancer Facts and Figures 2004-2005

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