

Circle Of Life: Cancer Education and Wellness

for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities



American Cancer Society Circle Of LifeSM
Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Wellness along the Cancer Journey:
Nearing the End Of Life
Revised October 2015

Chapter 2: Advanced Cancer



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Advanced Cancer

Group Discussion			
	True	False	Not Sure
1. Health care providers cannot assess advanced cancer.			
2. Cancer that is not considered curable may be called advanced cancer.			

Some types of cancer are more likely to spread than others. Cancer that has spread is called metastatic cancer. If cancer is not considered curable, it may be called advanced cancer. But a health care provider can't usually tell by just a physical exam whether a person already has advanced cancer.

It's also hard to know ahead of time whose cancer will spread. One way to get clues is to look at the cancer cells under a microscope. The more normal the cells look, the less likely they are to spread. Another way is to look at the size of the tumor. A larger tumor is often more likely to have spread. Also, if the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes, it is much more likely to spread to other parts of the body. Often the lymph nodes are removed during surgery to see if there are cancer cells in them. Using these tests helps the health care provider learn if the cancer has already spread.

If the cancer has not yet spread, health care providers aren't sure whether a person's cancer will spread in the future. So the health care provider does other tests to try to find the answers. Still, in many cases it's hard to predict what the cancer might do.

Signs and Symptoms of Advanced Cancer

Here we will list some of the signs of advanced cancer:

- The most telling symptom is losing energy and feeling tired (fatigued) and weak. This can get so bad that it may be hard to do daily tasks like bathing

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or getting dressed. People with advanced cancer often need help with these things. At some point, it gets so bad that they spend much of their time in bed.

- The person loses weight without a known reason.
- Pain may sometimes go along with advanced cancer, but not always.
- Shortness of breath is common when a cancer is growing in or has spread to the lungs.

A health care provider will ask about symptoms and do a physical exam. As part of the exam, they may look for certain signs, such as fluid in the lungs or stomach area, tumors (lumps) on or within the body, or a swollen liver.

Certain blood tests can also point to advanced cancer. Test results of liver function can be very high if the cancer has spread to the liver. Some cancers make substances called tumor markers. Blood tests can find these markers.

Pictures of the inside of the body (imaging studies) are used to look for advanced cancer, too. Many of the tests used to find advanced cancer may have been done when a person was first diagnosed with cancer.

Treatment

Advanced cancer is not likely to be cured, but it can often be treated to slow its growth. A person with cancer and their family should be clear about the goal of any treatment. They should know whether the goal is to try to cure the cancer, to let the person live longer, or to relieve symptoms. This can sometimes be confusing because the same treatments might be used for all of these reasons.

Some people believe that nothing more can be done if the cancer cannot be cured, so they stop all treatment. But often there are treatments that can control symptoms even if cure isn't possible. Relief from symptoms such as pain, blocked bowels, and upset stomach can help maintain or improve quality of life.

Calling the Shots

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A person has the right to make decisions about their treatment. Some people with advanced cancer decide that the burdens of aggressive cancer treatment are not worth the small chance of benefits. Others want to get treatment as long as there's a tiny chance it may help. Some people want to stay at home. Others choose to go to an assisted living center, a nursing home, or a hospice center. This is a very personal issue. A person should make the choices that are best for them.

They may decide after some point that they don't want any more treatment for their cancer. This may be hard for some loved ones to accept. It can help to include the family in these decisions.

Advance health care directives, which are discussed in the following section, are a way for a person to state ahead of time what kinds of treatment they want or do not want. The advance directive can put a person's wishes in writing in case they are not able to state their wishes later.