



What it Means Cancer to a Layman in India



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Opinion

In India, more than 1300 patients die every day due to cancer. More than 70% of these cancers are diagnosed in the population of age groups between 30 to 70 years. As you complete reading this article, two new cancer cases are detected every two-minute at some part of India. The actual incidence and burden may be still very high than these figures these figures are based on population-based registries. The layman approaches cancer with an emotion which astronomy or electricity does not arouse. Patients experience the diagnosis of cancer as one of the most traumatic and revolutionary events that has ever happened to them. Independent of prognosis, the diagnosis brings with it a change in a person's self-image and in his or her role in the home and workplace. The prognosis of a person who has just been found to have pancreatic cancer is the same as the prognosis of the person with serious heart disease. The patient with pancreatic cancer has a completely altered self-image and is viewed differently by family and anyone who knows the diagnosis. The cancer patient feels that he or she, and not just a body part, is diseased.

When we say Cancer, it is not actually a single disease, but the name given to a collection of related diseases where the common aspect is that some of the body's cells begin to divide without stopping, spreads into surrounding tissues and has capacity to reach farther body parts. Cancer is a genetic disease. These genes control the way our cells function, especially how they grow, divide and die. The Genetic changes that cause cancer can be inherited from our parents or can also arise during a person's lifetime because of errors during cell division or because of certain environmental exposures tobacco smoke, and radiation, such as ultraviolet rays from the sun. Human body is made up of trillions of cells. Cancer can arise from any of these cells. What it needs is one or few rogue cells among them which acquire some genetic abnormalities such that they no longer follow the rules imposed by genetic code. Normally what happens is they divide up to certain number of divisions, after which they grow old and die., human cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow, old or become damaged, they die, and new cells take their place.

The rogue cells called cancer stem cells don't die when they should and forms new cells where they are not needed leading

to formation of growths called tumours. Tumours can be benign or malignant. When we say malignant, it has capacity to divide without any restriction, can defy or delay death, invade surrounding structures and part of which can reach other organs and can form tumours separate from original tumour. What we are referring are solid tumours such as for example lung cancer, head and neck cancer etc. But blood cancers do not form masses always and spreads in the blood and bone marrow and related organs.

There has been an increase in awareness and better medical facilities in India now, but still there is a wide gap between survival rates for cancer patients between India and most countries. Reasons are many. One plausible reason is that cancer in India is diagnosed in later stages resulting in the treatment being complex and the probability of beating cancer at the root level also goes down. Even though awareness about cancer has increased, individuals still do not adhere to regular screening procedures. This could be due to lack of sufficient information and socio-economic factors. But what can be done to overcome the fear of being diagnosed with cancer when everybody is susceptible. The answer is to be aware of the facts and behave responsibly in life. Anything excess can be resulting in cancer. Genetic constitution of an individual cannot be altered. What can be altered, improved upon is human behavior. Healthy life style includes active physical activity, keeping body weight in control. Eating more of natural and less processed foods, not indulging in smoking, alcohol and drugs are some modifiable risk factors. Keeping in touch with physician for screening of preventable and treatable cancers especially for substantial risk population such as with family history of cancer is equally important.

The most common question that arises in the mind of a common man and most commonly asked question asked by the patient to himself and to the doctor also is "There are many smokers and alcoholics around me, in fact more addicted than me, But why me? The answer is very complicated spans hundreds of scientific pages, but the explanation is very simple, "Anyone can have a road traffic accident including those who follows rules. But the probability of accident is more with the rash driver and those who do not follow the traffic rules." All said and done, even when the patient reaches tertiary care cancer centre, the task of an oncologist is not a cake walk from the initiation of diagnostic workup to the starting point of

treatment. The load of patient admission is too high in government setup and cost is limiting factor for majority of patients if they must approach a private cancer centre. The key issues are cultural and social too. Because of prevalent illiteracy the patients as well the attendant's majority a times fails to understand the seriousness of illness and prognosis even when explained in the simplest terms. They expect the treatment either to completely cure the disease or thinks that the treatment is not working, which is not the case in majority of situations. The problem is even more in elderly population who are more prone to this age-related disease who may not get enough support from family which is striving to meet daily expenses. Less than 5 percent of population is covered in any sort of

health insurance. More disheartening is exploitation of innocence of suffering people by unrecognized quackery practitioners who promise the cure for incurable stages of cancer. Such practices are prevalent across the Indian subcontinent and are beyond the control of any authority as they play on the sentiments of common people who are not affording for allopathic care. Cancer doesn't discriminate. It affects all the strata of society and all societies, civilizations and populations across the globe. As the famous pathologist said, "The only way to avoid cancer is not to be born." At this point of time most important task is to be aware and spread awareness about cancer.



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