

Medical Meanderings

How we face cancer

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Everyone is terribly afraid of cancer. We all know of people who have suffered from it, had surgery or powerful drugs for it, and some who died from it. It can be a frightening experience, one that takes a lot of courage to face.

Cancer isn't just one disease -- there are more than a hundred kinds. It occurs when normal cells in the body change in some way so they keep on growing and dividing at a rapid rate, much faster than the normal cells. These cells require a large amount of nutrients, so they rob the normal ones and eventually squeeze them out. They can form a mass or tumor which can keep getting bigger. However, a tumor is not cancer if it only enlarges, but does not spread anywhere else. Then it is a benign tumor. It is a malignant tumor, or cancer, if it can send small bits of itself to different parts of the body, such as liver, brain or lungs. It interferes with the body's normal activity, often causes pain and weight loss, and eventually death if not stopped.

People approach cancer in three different ways. Each approach depends on their own nature. The first approach is to ignore it. Some people are so afraid of cancer they don't even want to think of it. They aren't interested in trying to prevent it. In fact, often they do things, like smoking cigarettes, which make it more likely. They especially don't want to go looking for it. They feel that "when my time comes, it will come." They think that if they go looking for it, they may find it, and they don't want that. These people will probably not be helped by this article. In fact, they probably won't even read it, because it will make them face the thought of cancer.

I can recall a woman in her forties who was a secretary and lived alone. She complained of some vague abdominal discomfort and a bit of swelling in her abdomen. On examination, she looked as if she were pregnant because her abdomen was so large. Instead of a baby she had a hard tumor growing. It was obvious that she had a tumor, yet she waited many months before coming in to be checked. I guess she thought that she would die anyway, so why come in until it became painful. However, when the tumor was removed, it was found benign. She didn't have cancer after all, and was cured! All that suffering and worrying was for naught.

Another woman wasn't so lucky. She noticed a small lump in her breast, not much bigger than a pea. She figured it would go away. It didn't and continued to grow. She waited until it was the size of a baseball before getting it checked. By that time it had metastasized, or spread to other parts of her body. Because of their fear of cancer, both of these women suffered. Fear made them delay when they should have acted.

A second group of people are petrified of cancer. They think a lot about cancer and they pay a lot of attention to how they feel. In fact, they pay too much attention to every symptom, because they think that every symptom may be due to cancer. These people have cancer-phobia. The fear of cancer so dominates their lives that they can't be happy, relax and enjoy life.

A middle-aged man came in complaining of abdominal discomfort and wondered if he had cancer. In fact, he was sure he must have cancer somewhere. He had a little cough for a few days, so wanted a chest X-ray to check for that. He also noticed some headache, so thought he might have brain cancer. It turned out that he had just seen another doctor for his abdominal complaints who had examined him and done a complete set of tests and x-rays and found nothing wrong. This man was so afraid of cancer that nothing could convince him he didn't have it. He was unable to live a normal life. He needed to pay less attention to his body and more attention to the world around him.

A third group of people are also afraid of cancer, but they have a more positive outlook than the first two groups. They know that cancer can be treated, and often can be cured -- especially if caught early. They want to prevent cancer, if possible, so they don't smoke. And if they do have symptoms suggestive of cancer, the especially want to find out as soon as possible so they can have the best chance of getting rid of it. They take charge of their lives and bodies.

These people have a much healthier mental outlook. They realize, of course, that no one lives forever. But they also understand that they can do a great deal to insure a longer, healthier life. By being aware of the warning signs of cancer and not ignoring them when present, and by having periodic medical checkups, they significantly lower the risk of dying of cancer.

For those who don't remember the seven warning signals of cancer, they are: 1) change in bowel or bladder habits; 2) a sore that does not heal; 3) unusual bleeding or discharge; 4) thickening or lump in breast or elsewhere; 5) indigestion or difficulty in swallowing; 6) obvious change in wart or mole; and 7) nagging cough or hoarseness.

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