

Knowing cancer red flags can help in prompt diagnosis, possible cure of disease

Written by meg sibal, m.d.

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BEING aware of the warning signs of cancer cannot be overemphasized since, according to Mount Sinai geriatrician Patricia Bloom, many cancers have a high cure rate if treatment starts early in the disease process, before cancer spreads to other parts of the body, says the August 2015 issue of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Focus on Healthy Aging.

According to a 2014 study (PLOS ONE, Dec. 2), more than half of the study's respondents said they had experienced at least one red-flag cancer "alarm" symptom during the previous three months — however, only two percent of them thought that cancer was a possible cause.

About 45 percent had not sought their doctor's advice, and many attributed their symptoms to reasons other than cancer — including their age, arthritis, an infection, hemorrhoids and/or cysts.

By dismissing potential warning signs of cancer as less serious symptoms, many individuals could be putting their lives at risk, adds the health letter.

Mount Sinai Dr. Patricia Bloom recommends seeing your doctor if you experience any of the following:

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- Unexplained weight loss — “An unexplained weight loss of 10 pounds or more may be the first sign that you have cancer,” says Dr. Bloom.
- Fatigue — “Fatigue often sets in as cancers grow, because cancer cells drain the body’s energy supply, and also may release substances that change the way the body makes energy from food,” Dr. Bloom says.
- Nagging cough or hoarseness — A cough is the most common symptom of lung cancer and also can signal thyroid cancer — “Most coughs should clear within three or four weeks, so don’t ignore one that lasts longer, especially if you’re a smoker or a former smoker,” Dr. Bloom says. Since malignancies can directly affect the larynx or the nerves that control it, which affects the vocal cords, a hoarse voice also can signal head and neck cancers.
- A persistent change in bowel or bladder habits —such as constipation, diarrhea or a change in the size of the stool can be a sign of colon cancer, and pain urinating, blood in the urine, or increased frequency in urinating may signal bladder, kidney or prostate cancer.
- A change in the shape or color of a mole, freckle or wart — can indicate skin cancer. “Other signs include a mole that bleeds, but skin cancer also can manifest as pearly bumps, flat brown lesions, scaly patches, and sores that don’t heal,” says Arash Akhavan, M.D., assistant professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai. “Keep in mind that skin cancer doesn’t just develop on areas where you’ve suffered a sunburn,” Dr. Akhavan adds. “It can develop anywhere.” If you smoke or chew tobacco, also be particularly vigilant for mouth sores — “The lining of the mouth renews itself every two weeks,” says Dr. Akhavan, “so if a sore doesn’t heal within this time, report it to your doctor or dentist.”
- Unexplained bleeding — Unusual bleeding can occur in early or advanced cancer — for example, coughing of blood can be a sign of lung cancer, while a bloody discharge from the nipple can signal breast cancer. “Blood in the urine can be a sign of kidney or bladder cancer, while blood in the stool can red flag colon or rectal cancer,” says Dr. Bloom. “You may not see bright red blood — rather, stool may be very dark or black.”
- A lump or thickened area — Breast cancer is only one cancer that can be felt through the skin — so can testicular cancer, and cancer of the lymph nodes (small bean-shaped glands around

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the body). Cancer-related swelling also may occur in the neck, armpit and groin. Also, keep in mind that some breast cancers show up as red or dimpled skin, rather than a lump.

- Bloating — “Persistent abdominal bloating can sometimes mean ovarian cancer,” says Dr. Bloom. “If your symptoms don’t go away within two or three weeks, or if you’re bloated despite losing weight, see your doctor.”

- Chronic heartburn — and/or persistent difficulty swallowing can be a sign of esophageal cancer, although this is very rare.

Although Dr. Bloom points out that most individuals with these warning signs won’t have cancer — “Heartburn is usually the result of eating too much or eating hot spicy foods,” she says, “while a persistent cough could be due to a chest infection” — even so, Dr. Bloom says it is important to get any symptoms checked out, since many cancers have a high cure rate if treatment starts early in the disease process, before cancer spreads to other parts of the body.

“A good example of this is melanoma,” she says. “The most lethal form of skin cancer, it has a five-year survival rate of 98 percent if it hasn’t spread. However, once it has spread, the five-year survival rate falls to about 16 percent.”

Dr. Bloom also urges that you inform yourself about cancer risk factors:

- Unmodifiable cancer risk factors — include: a) a personal or family history of cancer; b) your age; and c) having genes that place you at higher risk of breast, ovarian and other cancers.

- Modifiable cancer risk factors — include a) smoking; b) excessive alcohol intake; c) obesity; and d) a diet high in saturated fats (like those present in red meat), and low in fruits and vegetables, and fiber.

“Even an older adult still has time to address modifiable risk factors by eating healthfully, quitting a smoking habit, and getting more exercise,” concludes Dr. Bloom.