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Kidney (Renal Cell) Cancer

Topic Overview

What is kidney cancer?

Kidney cancer starts when abnormal cells grow out of control in one or both kidneys. The kidneys are two bean-shaped organs located on either side of the spine, just below the ribs. They filter wastes from the blood and help balance water, salt, and mineral levels in the blood.

Another name for kidney cancer is renal cancer. "Renal" means having to do with the kidney.

This topic is about renal cell carcinoma, the most common type of kidney cancer.

Kidney cancer that is found early often can be successfully treated. But when it isn't found early, the cancer may spread, or metastasize, to other parts of the body, such as the lymph nodes, the lungs, the bones, or the liver.

What causes kidney cancer?

Experts aren't sure what causes kidney cancer. But there are certain things that make you more likely to get this cancer. Your risk is higher if you:

- Smoke.
- Have a job that regularly exposes you to certain chemicals or minerals, such as asbestos, gasoline, and cadmium (used in manufacturing).
- Use too much pain medicine for a long time.
- Have certain inherited conditions, such as von Hippel-Lindau disease.

What are the symptoms?

Kidney cancer doesn't usually cause symptoms at first. It's often discovered by imaging tests—tests that produce pictures of the inside of the body—that are done for other reasons.

After it begins to spread, kidney cancer may cause one or more of these symptoms:

- Blood in the urine.
- A lump that can be felt in the lower back or belly.
- Pain in the side or the back.

How is kidney cancer diagnosed?

If your symptoms make your doctor think that you may have kidney cancer, he or she will order imaging tests. The pictures from these tests usually show whether there is cancer in your kidney and how far it may have spread.

How is it treated?

Whenever possible, doctors use surgery to remove kidney cancer. When the cancer is in its early stages and hasn't spread, doctors are often able to remove it all, and no further treatment is needed.

When surgery isn't possible, or if the cancer is advanced, doctors may use:

- Heat (radiofrequency ablation) or cold (cryoablation) to destroy small tumours.
- Immunotherapy.
- Targeted therapy.

When kidney cancer is found before it has spread, about 9 out of 10 people will live 5 years or longer. Doctors use 5-year survival rates to show the percentage of people still alive 5 years after treatment. Of course, many people live much longer than that. In fact, for many people, the cancer never returns.

After the cancer has spread beyond the kidney, how long a person lives usually depends on how much the cancer has spread. The more the cancer has spread, the lower the survival rate.

Finding out that you have cancer can change your life. You may feel like your world has turned upside down and you have lost all control. Talking with family, friends, or a counsellor can really help. Ask your doctor about support groups. Or call the Canadian Cancer Society (1-888-939-3333) or visit its website at www.cancer.ca.