

CHILDHOOD CANCER AND LEUKAEMIA



FACT SHEET

Children can develop cancer or leukemia at any time.

Between 1982 and 1991, 467 new cases of cancer in children (up to 14 years) were recorded in Western Australia. A Cancer Foundation report presented these findings:

The rate of childhood cancers in WA over the last 10 years has stayed about the same. There has not been an increase. The rate of childhood cancers for both country and city areas are similar. There are no areas in the State where childhood cancer is more common.

In WA, 1 in 500 children will develop cancer before their 15th birthday. The rate of childhood cancer in WA is similar to that for other developed countries. Rates for Aboriginal children were less than the wider population.

Even though cancer in children is rare, it ranks second after injury and poisoning as a cause of death in children from 1 to 14 years old in WA. An average of 50 children are diagnosed with cancer every year in WA and there are about 15 deaths a year from childhood cancer. Cancer is slightly more common in boys than girls.

Many children with cancer survive and will lead healthy lives. The number of children dying from childhood cancers has decreased over the last 10 years.

TYPES OF CHILDHOOD CANCERS

There are different types of childhood cancer and childhood cancer is different from adult cancer. The most common childhood cancers are leukemia and central nervous system cancers. Children may also have rarer cancers such as lymphomas, neuroblastomas, Wilm's tumour and bone and soft tissue sarcoma.

Leukemia is a cancer of the tissues that make blood, mainly bone marrow. White blood cells are infection fighters. In leukemia abnormal white blood cells that can't fight infection accumulate and interfere with the production of normal cells.

It is unusual for a child to get an adult-type cancer and from about 20 years people do not get childhood cancers. Childhood cancers are different from adult cancers and usually need different treatments.

The cause of most childhood cancers remains unknown. A small number of childhood cancers are associated with rare genetic diseases but most cases occur in previously healthy children who develop cancer for no apparent reason.

In adults we know that environmental exposures, such as cigarette smoking are responsible for up to 80 per cent of cancers. In children we are not so sure. In recent years, many studies have tried to pinpoint specific environmental factors that may be associated with childhood cancer risk such as; power lines, pesticides and maternal exposures during pregnancy. However there is not yet sufficient evidence to suggest that we could prevent childhood cancers at this stage. Genetic counselling is available if there is a known genetic component.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

The symptoms depend on the type of cancer. A child with leukemia may be pale, tired and bruise easily. For other childhood cancers, symptoms could include swelling, early morning headaches or a lump. Obviously as these symptoms are common, a doctor must decide if further investigation is needed.

If cancer is confirmed, treatment may involve surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, bone marrow transplants and various supportive measures. Usually treatment is carried out by a specialist team in a children's cancer unit. The specialist referral centre in WA is Princess Margaret Hospital's Oncology unit, which has an international reputation.

OUTLOOK

The outlook for childhood cancers has improved over the past few decades and in WA more than 70 per cent of children treated for cancer in the period covered by the report, were alive 5 years later. A child who survived for this time after first diagnosis, is most probably cured of the disease. The treatment of children's cancers has been one of the success stories in the cancer treatment area. As research continues, and better diagnosis and treatments are found, further advances are likely to be made.

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For more information on any aspect of cancer, please contact the Cancer Helpline on 13 11 20 state-wide.

The above information is provided by the Cancer Foundation of Western Australia which acknowledges assistance from the WA Cancer Registry, Health Statistics Branch, the Health Department of WA.

CARING FOR CHILDREN WITH CANCER

When a child you care for is diagnosed with cancer or leukemia you may feel shocked and very sad. You may find the need to cope with supporting the child, other children, the family, other staff and yourself. Share your concerns with your peers and accept that you can offer support and care in a quality children's programme.

If the child is unwell, plan to provide comfort, enjoyment and the pleasure of the company of other children. Sometimes seriously ill children are unable to do anything but observe and caregivers feel they are not "doing enough".

Children often prefer to be with their peers and lead as normal as possible a life. The situation is sad and tragic but it is good to know you are giving the child what they really need – quality time with their peers and your acceptance.

Maintain contact when the child is absent or in hospital by sending children's art work, photographs and tape recordings of favourite songs. Older children can make taped messages for their friends.

Talk with parents about what the child knows and understands. Today many children fully understand their situation and if this is the case be open and honest with them.

Being open to questions and providing developmentally appropriate but truthful explanations is the best approach for all concerned.

For further information and advice, contact CHILD Australia.

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