

such as ovarian cancer, undergo a repeating cycle of growing, shrinking and stabilisation. With cancer being managed as a chronic illness, patients can survive for years. Proper treatments can also control cancer and relieve symptoms.

When is chemotherapy necessary?

Chemotherapy uses cytotoxic drugs to kill or control cancer cells. Unfortunately, healthy cells, such as those in the lining of the mouth, bone marrow, hair follicles and the digestive system, are also destroyed in the process.

Common side effects include hair loss or thinning, higher risk of infection, mouth sores, nausea and vomiting, fatigue, change in appetite, change in bowel habit, etc.

Taking such factors as tumour size and tumour grade into consideration, Oncologists will decide to administer chemotherapy after discussion with patients. The decision and the regimen combination vary from cancer to cancer.

Should I undergo genetic test for cancer?

Genetic testing is now available for the rare cases of hereditary cancers, such as breast and colon cancer. You are advised to consult a related specialist if you have a family history of these cancers.

It is especially recommended for those with relatives diagnosed with certain cancers at an unusually young age.

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Cancer
WINNING AGAINST CANCER

What is cancer?

Cancer refers to a class of diseases caused by uncontrollable division, infiltration and spread of abnormal cells in the body. While it remains the No. 1 killer in Hong Kong, thanks to advances in cancer screening, diagnosis and management, the survival rates and prognoses have been improving over the past decades.

What causes cancer?

The causes of cancer are mostly unknown. While it is difficult to pinpoint a definite and single cause for many cancers, in general there are 4 groups of possible environmental risk factors:

- Virus, e.g. human papilloma viruses are responsible for cervical cancers
- Chemicals, e.g. cigarettes, alcohol
- Radiation, e.g. UV light, prior radiotherapy
- Hormones

What are the different stages of cancer?

The term “stage” refers to the extent of cancer, tumour size and metastasis (if any). The most widely used cancer staging system is TNM (T: Tumour, N: Node; M: Metastasis).

In general, TNM divides cancer into 4 stages.

Example: Breast Cancer

Stage	Tumour Size	Node	Metastasis to Distant Organ
I	2cm or smaller	No metastasis in axillary lymph nodes	---
II	Larger than 2cm but 5 cm / smaller 2 cm (with lymph node metastasis)	Metastasis in 1 to 3 axillary lymph nodes (tumour is smaller than 2 cm)	---

III	Larger than 5cm	Metastasis in 4 or more axillary lymph nodes, or in nodes over the chest wall thoracic or lower neck.	---
IV	Any size	Any involvement	Metastatic breast cancer, i.e. metastasis to distant organs, such as lung, liver or bone

Is cancer age-related?

Age is one of the major risk factors of cancer. Recent statistics and research show that the risk of certain cancers, e.g. breast and colorectal cancer, increases with age.

According to the Hong Kong cancer statistics of Hospital Authority, 50% of cancers were diagnosed in people aged over 65 in 2016, compared with a mere 0.6% in children and adolescents (i.e. aged 0-19 years).

Median Age of Diagnosis (HK Cancer Statistics 2016)			
Cancer	Male	Cancer	Female
Lung	69	Breast	56
Colorectal	68	Colorectal	69
Prostate	71	Lung	67
Liver	64	Corpus Uteri	56
Stomach	71	Thyroid	49

In the 65 -74 age group, the most common cancer was

lung cancer for males and breast cancer for females. Among people aged 75 or older, the most common cancer was lung cancer for males and colorectal cancer for females.

Is cancer preventable?

Generally speaking, cancers arise by chance or by hereditary. The fact that cancer can be unpredictable, however, does not mean that it cannot be prevented or cured if diagnosed at the earliest opportunity.

You can definitely lower the risk of getting cancer with a healthy lifestyle, less exposure to carcinogens (e.g. excessive sunlight exposure) and regular screening. A healthy lifestyle means, among others:

- Refraining from smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke;
- Minimising alcohol consumption;
- Having a balanced diet, e.g. eat more fruit and vegetables, less red meat and processed meat; and
- Regular exercise.

Is cancer hereditary?

Some people are genetically predisposed to certain kinds of cancer, e.g. breast, ovarian and colorectal cancer, due to gene mutations.

The incidence of hereditary cancer is rare, and genetic testing is available as prevention and precaution measures.

Can cancer be treated as a chronic disease?

Certain cancers, such as ovarian cancer, and those that have spread to distant organs, e.g. metastatic breast cancer, may not be cured completely. They may become a chronic illness like diabetes, which require regular surveillance and treatment to stop it from growing or spreading further.

Remission is not impossible, i.e. absence of tumour or size reduction for at least a month. Some cancers,