

Cancers in children

It is breast cancer awareness month and many of us might be wondering, "Do children get breast cancer?" or "what types of cancer do children get?"

Types of childhood cancers Although cancer is the most deadly disease of childhood and adolescence, it strikes just 9,000 youngsters a year, as compared to approximately 1.2 million adults. Nine in 10 adult cancers are carcinomas, malignancies of the cells lining the inner or outer surfaces of organs such as the lung, breast, prostate, colon and bladder. The most common types of cancers in children are: Leukaemia Lymphoma Brain cancer Neuroblastoma (a cancer of the nervous system) Wilms tumour (a cancer of the kidney) Cancers of childhood tend to be more curable than adult tumours. While the five-year survival rate for adults has struggled to exceed the 50 per cent mark, about 70 per cent of young patients can expect to enjoy a normal life span. That is a dramatic increase from the mid-1970s, when nearly half of all youngsters with cancer died. Leukaemia This is cancer of the bone marrow, which manufactures the three types of blood cells. White blood cells (leukocytes) serve as the body's defence system against infection. In leukaemia, the marrow produces an overabundance of cancerous white cells. Eventually they crowd out the healthy, infection-fighting mature leukocytes in the marrow and the bloodstream, opening the door to viruses, bacteria and other microorganisms. At the same time, the impaired marrow grinds out oxygen-toting red blood cells and platelets, the cells responsible for clotting of the blood. When the cancer spreads outside the bone marrow, the blood vessels may whisk it to the brain and spinal cord, the testicles, the ovaries, the kidneys and other organs. Lymphoma These are cancers of the lymphatic system. Intertwined among the blood vessels is a network of thin lymphatic vessels, which collect straw-coloured lymph fluid from the body's tissues and return it to a pair of veins in the upper chest so that it can repeat its excursion through the body as the liquid portion of the blood. En route, lymph passes through pea-sized organs called lymph nodes, which filter out and destroy infectious agents and toxic substances. The nodes are scattered through the lymphatic system but can be found in large clusters in the neck, pelvis, abdomen, chest and armpits. Because there is so much lymph tissue in the body, lymphomas can occur and spread virtually anywhere. When these cancers metastasise, it's often to the liver, the bone marrow or the spleen. One particular type, Hodgkins Disease, has a five-year survival rate exceeding 90 per cent. It is one of the most curable cancers of adolescence. Combined, leukaemia's and lymphomas account for almost half of paediatric cancers. How will you know? There is no way of knowing initially as the symptoms of cancers tend to be very non-specific. Symptoms common to all types of cancers include: persistent fevers, fatigue, loss of appetite, weight loss. More specific symptoms include: bone pain or joint pains, swollen lymph nodes, pale skin, unexplained bleeding, headaches, seizures, paralysis, mass or swelling of the abdomen. The diagnosis will be made by your physician after a thorough examination and appropriate investigations. Dr Carleene Grant-Davis is a consultant paediatrician and head, Department of Paediatrics, Cornwall Regional Hospital.