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Should I consider radiotherapy in cancer treatment?

Q *My 30-year-old sister was recently diagnosed with cancer. She was told that radiotherapy is an option. What is radiotherapy and how is it different from other treatment forms such as chemotherapy?*

A Radiotherapy is a type of cancer treatment that can cause the DNA of cancer cells to break and lead to cancer cell death. It uses an external form of high-energy rays equivalent to X-ray, or internal form of internal radiation using high-energy gamma rays. Although the surrounding normal cells can also be affected, they usually recover and function normally.

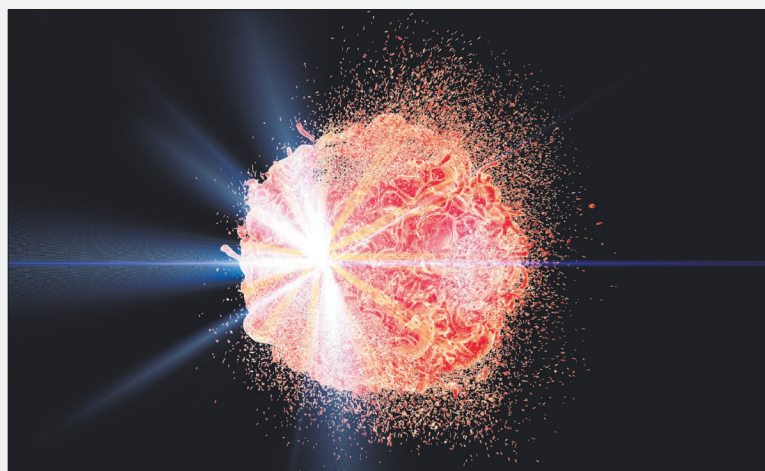
As radiation is only delivered to a local area of the body, the side effects are limited to the area affected. On the other hand, chemotherapy is given through the blood or ingested orally, and has generalised side effects on dividing cells of the body.

Radiotherapy can be used as a curative option or in a palliative setting. As a curative option, it can be given as a primary treatment when surgery is not possible or after surgery to improve local control. The effectiveness of radiation depends on the cancer type, stage and site of cancer, and the radiation doses delivered.

It is estimated that 50 per cent of all cancer patients will need radiation as part of their cancer treatments. Radiation can be an effective way to treat and improve symptom control in advanced stage cancers.

What are the common side effects?

The site and the dosage of ra-



Radiotherapy is a type of cancer treatment that can cause the DNA of cancer cells to break and lead to cancer cell death. PHOTO: ISTOCK

diotherapy used are important factors for patients to discuss with their radiation oncologists regarding side effects. The early side effects vary as they are related to the inflammation process and are localised to the part of the body that receives radiation. For example, in treating breast cancer, radiation can cause skin redness and sometimes the skin may peel off at the completion of radiation. This is called radiation dermatitis but it will recover after two to six weeks.

It is important to note that the daily radiotherapy is not painful. However, some patients may feel pain due to the local inflammation reaction nearing the end of the treatment. This will take one to four weeks to settle down and the pain will subside.

How will I know if the treatment is working?

After completion of treatment, regular consultations with the

surgeon, medical and radiation oncologist is necessary. During the consultation, clinical history and examination are performed. Sometimes, radiological scans are necessary as part of the follow-up to check the response of the treatment.

The suitability of radiation varies greatly as some cancers are more radio-sensitive than others. Some cancers allow radiotherapy to be used independently while others must be used after surgery.

For more detailed information, do consult your doctor.

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