

Living with lymphoma

Advances in treatment methods make this cancer of the lymphatic system a highly treatable one, says medical oncologist Dr Hsieh Wen-Son



Adults over 60 are more susceptible to lymphoma, which is also one of the most treatable cancers. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Lymphoma is a type of cancer that grows in white blood cells, which are part of the immune system. Usually categorised as aggressive or non-aggressive, these are non-Hodgkin's lymphoma which makes up the majority of such cancer cases.

Aggressive lymphoma grows very quickly, while non-aggressive or indolent lymphoma progresses slowly over the years.

In Singapore, lymphoma is the fifth and sixth most common in males and females respectively, according to Singhealth. Adults over 60 are more at risk for lymphoma, although it can happen to younger adults and children too.

However, it is also one of the most treatable cancers, says medical oncologist Dr Hsieh Wen-Son, from Icon Cancer Centre at Mount Alvernia Hospital. Here, he shares more about the cancer's possible symptoms and treatment methods.

Q What are the symptoms of lymphoma? Are they mistaken for other types of illnesses?

The most common symptom is swollen lymph nodes, which can be in the neck, under the arms, or the groin area.

They may also occur in other places such as the chest, which may cause a cough and shortness of breath; and the abdomen, which may lead to abdominal bloating or back pain.

The patient may also experience fatigue, fevers, drenching sweats or unexplained weight loss.

These symptoms are also signs of infections. However, the major difference is that infections will improve or go away with treatment such as antibiotics, whereas lymphomas will persist unless treated.

Q I suspect my symptoms may point to lymphoma. How will the doctor confirm it?

It involves taking a cell sample from a swollen lymph

node and examining the cells under a microscope.

Following diagnosis, the doctor will determine the stage of the lymphoma – how far it has spread – by conducting detailed scans using Computed Tomography (CT) or Positron Emission Tomography/Computed Tomography (PET/CT).

Q What are some treatment methods for lymphoma and how do they affect the body?

Chemotherapy remains a key component for treating lymphoma. Significant numbers of patients with aggressive lymphomas have been cured by chemotherapy, which has also been used to keep indolent lymphomas under control for many years.

The biggest advancements in dealing with lymphoma are targeted treatments such as Bruton tyrosine kinase inhibitors (BTK) and antibody-drug conjugates.

These attack the lymphoma cells while sparing the normal cells, and are said to have increased effectiveness and decreased side effects.

Other new treatments are immunotherapies used to kill lymphomas that are resistant to other forms of treatment.

One is CAR (Chimeric Antigen Receptor) T-cell therapy which utilises immune cells that have been removed from the patient's own body.

Another type called bi-specific T-cell engagers are antibodies that activate the immune system to kill lymphoma cells. These antibodies have resulted in long remissions in patients.



Dr Hsieh Wen-Son

Medical oncologist
 Icon Cancer Centre
 Mount Alvernia Hospital
 Medical Centre A #05-03/04