

Symptoms of nose cancer

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Nasopharyngeal cancer, or nose cancer, which occurs in the cells lining the area behind the nose and just above the back of the throat, is one of the most common cancers among men in Singapore.

According to the 2019 Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Report, it is one of the top three most common cancers in men aged 30 to 49, and the eighth most common cause of cancer death in males, with 474 cases from 2015 to 2019.

Associate Professor Melvin Chua, head and senior consultant at the Department of Head, Neck and Thoracic at National Cancer Centre Singapore's Division of Radiation Oncology, says the centre has about 150 to 200 new nose cancer cases a year.

He says the particular cancer affects mostly Southern Han Chinese, namely those from the Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese and Hainanese dialect groups. "In this population, the risk of contracting nose cancer is primarily attributed to genetic risk factors linked to the Southern Han Chinese race and exposure to a common virus infection known as the Epstein-Barr virus infection at a young age."

Apart from ethnicity, other factors such as smoking and certain dietary habits, such as the consumption of salted fish and vegetables, have been previously found to be associated with a higher risk of developing nose cancer.

Prof Chua notes that salted and preserved foods are high in nitrosamines, a carcinogenic compound linked to nose cancer.

Early-stage nose cancer tends to be asymptomatic and is often discovered by chance, he says.

Nose cancer is often discovered late as it displays few symptoms in its earlier stages. About 70 per cent of newly diagnosed patients present with stage three or four cancer, notes Prof Chua.

Common symptoms include a painless neck lump, nose discharge or bleeding, nasal blockage that does not go away, impaired hearing or ringing in the ears and unusual face pain or numbness.

Radiotherapy, also known as radiation therapy, is the main treatment for patients with nose cancer, and usually spans between six and 61/ weeks. Patients with stage one and two cancer are treated with radiotherapy.

The cure rates are higher for patients with stage one and two cancer compared with stage three and four cancer.

"Nonetheless, unlike other cancers, even when patients have stage three and four cancer, they stand a good chance of cure, with intensive chemotherapy and radiotherapy," notes Prof Chua.

There is no way to prevent cancer currently, he says, apart from screening, which may help in the detection of early-stage disease.