

## **Signs and Symptoms of Cancer**

It would be great if all serious illnesses hurt worse than a broken leg, grabbed our attention and made us run to the Emergency Department for a STAT diagnosis of a terminal disease. Unfortunately, this is not the case. And, the nagging feeling that something is not quite right may be all that you have to hang your hat upon in the early stages of cancer.

The good news is that the cancer survival rate continues to improve for many diseases. As an ovarian cancer survivor it was comforting to know that this disease's survival rate has improved markedly since my days in medical school, almost twenty years ago. So the general and specific signs and symptoms of cancer, from the American Cancer Society, will be reviewed.

### **General Cancer Signs and Symptoms**

It is important to know what some of the general (non-specific) signs and symptoms of cancer are. They include unexplained weight loss, fever, fatigue, pain, and changes in the skin. Of course, it's important to remember that having any of these does not necessarily mean that cancer is present -- there are many other conditions that can cause these signs and symptoms as well.

**Unexplained weight loss:** Most people with cancer will lose weight at some time with their disease. An unexplained (unintentional) weight loss of 10 pounds or more may be the first sign of cancer, particularly cancers of the pancreas, stomach, esophagus, or lung.

**Fever:** Fever is very common with cancer, but is more often seen in advanced disease. Almost all patients with cancer will have fever at some time, particularly if the cancer or its treatment affects the immune system and reduces resistance to infection. Less often, fever may be an early sign of cancer, such as with leukemia or lymphoma.

**Fatigue:** Fatigue may be a significant symptom as cancer progresses. It may occur early, however, in cancers such as with leukemia or if the cancer is causing a chronic loss of blood, as in some colon or stomach cancers.

**Pain:** Pain may be an early symptom with some cancers, such as bone cancers or testicular cancer. Most often, however, pain is a symptom of advanced disease.

**Skin changes:** In addition to cancers of the skin, some internal cancers can produce visible skin signs such as darkening (hyperpigmentation), yellowing (jaundice), reddening (erythema), itching, or excessive hair growth.

### **Specific Cancer Signs and Symptoms**

In addition to the above general symptoms, you should be watchful for the following common symptoms, which could be an indication of cancer. Again, there may be other causes for each of these, but it is important to bring them to your doctor's attention as soon as possible so that they can be investigated.

Change in bowel habits or bladder function: Chronic constipation, diarrhea, or a change in the size of the stool may indicate colon cancer. Pain with urination, blood in the urine, or a change in bladder function (such as more frequent or less frequent urination) could be related to bladder or prostate cancer. Any changes in bladder or bowel function should be reported to your doctor.

Sores that do not heal: Skin cancers may bleed and resemble sores that do not heal. A persistent sore in the mouth could be an oral cancer and should be dealt with promptly, especially in patients who smoke, chew tobacco, or frequently drink alcohol. Sores on the penis or vagina may either be signs of infection or an early cancer, and should not be overlooked in either case.

Unusual bleeding or discharge: Unusual bleeding can occur in either early or advanced cancer. Blood in the sputum (phlegm) may be a sign of lung cancer. Blood in the stool (or a dark or black stool) could be a sign of colon or rectal cancer. Cancer of the cervix or the endometrium (lining of the uterus) can cause vaginal bleeding. Blood in the urine is a sign of possible bladder or kidney cancer. A bloody discharge from the nipple may be a sign of breast cancer.

Thickening or lump in breast or other parts of the body: Many cancers can be felt through the skin, particularly in the breast, testicle, lymph nodes (glands), and the soft tissues of the body. A lump or thickening may be an early or late sign of cancer. Any lump or thickening should be reported to your doctor, especially if you've just discovered it or noticed it has grown in size. You may be feeling a lump that is an early cancer that could be treated successfully.

Indigestion or trouble swallowing: While they commonly have other causes, these symptoms may indicate cancer of the esophagus, stomach, or pharynx (throat).

Recent change in a wart or mole: Any change in color or shape, loss of definite borders, or an increase in size should be reported to your doctor without delay. The skin lesion may be a melanoma which, if diagnosed early, can be treated successfully.

Nagging cough or hoarseness: A cough that does not go away may be a sign of lung cancer. Hoarseness can be a sign of cancer of the larynx (voice box) or thyroid.

While the signs and symptoms listed above are the more common ones seen with cancer, there are many others that are less common and are not listed here. If you notice any major changes in the way your body functions or the way you feel, especially if it lasts for a long time or gets worse, let your doctor know. If it has nothing to do with cancer, your doctor can investigate it and treat it, if needed. If it is cancer, you'll give yourself the best chance to have it treated early, when treatment is most likely to be effective.

Carol L. Clinton, MD

[www.timelessskinsolutions.com](http://www.timelessskinsolutions.com)