How Is a Kidney Cancer Diagnosis Made?

by MARLENE WALLACE

Getting a Kidney Cancer Diagnosis

Primary kidney cancer is cancer that starts within the kidneys. The most common type that develops in adults is referred to as renal cell carcinoma while young children are more likely to get a kidney cancer known as Wilms' tumor.

Metastatic kidney cancer occurs when it spreads (i.e. metastasizes) beyond the kidneys into other areas of the body. Patients who develop metastatic kidney cancer are among approximately 15,000 individuals within the US who are diagnosed with this cancer every year.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Kidney Cancer?

In its earliest stages of kidney cancer, the cancer very seldom causes any outward signs or symptoms. However, in the latter stages, signs and symptoms of kidney cancer may include:

- Bloody urine (e.g. reddish, pinkish or cola colored).
- Persistent back pain, situated just below the ribs.
- Loss of weight.
- Tiredness.
- Fever that comes and goes.

Make an appointment to see your family doctor if you have any of the above and/or you have any signs or symptoms that are worrying you.

The Process of Getting a Kidney Cancer Diagnosis

Your family physician will refer you to an urologist. This is a specialist who is very familiar with kidney cancer. Typically, the urologist will also work collaboratively with an oncologist (i.e. a doctor specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of kidney cancer) to optimize your treatment option(s).

Every patient’s case is different. Therefore, there is no single way of treating each and every patient. Effective treatment(s) will depend on many personal factors that are unique to the individual.

In order to make your initial conversation with your specialist more productive, you may want to educate yourself about kidney cancer prior to the appointment. It is very important to always be aware of the quality and reliability of the medical information sources you are looking at online.

Preparing for your medical appointments can benefit you in many ways. You will feel less stressed and have a better overall experience if you do a few things prior to the day of your specialist’s visit.

How to Prepare for Your Appointment

- **Become familiar with your insurance coverage:** Find out about your personal medical insurance coverage (i.e., Medicare cancer coverage) as well as the various limits. Take your insurance card and any referrals with you. Depending on the type(s) of treatment(s) recommended, you may require additional referrals and/or authorizations over the course of your kidney cancer care.
- **Make a detailed list of questions and/or issues you have.** Every question is important so do not be afraid to ask about anything that concerns you. The following is a list of possible questions you may want to ask your kidney cancer team:

    1. Exactly what kind of cancer do I have?
    2. What stage is my cancer at?
    3. Will I feel any kind of pain?
    4. What kidney cancer treatment options are available to me? What are the side effects?
    5. Do I qualify for any clinical trials?
    6. Where can I find out additional information related to my diagnosis and treatment as well as how to cope effectively?
    7. How do I deal with my anxieties and fears?
    8. Exactly what should I say to my significant other, children, family and/or friends?
    9. Where can I get information concerning advanced care planning such as a health care proxy form?
    10. What if I my medical insurance does not cover all of my prescribed treatments?
    11. How can I find out about any complementary therapies?
    12. What happens when my kidney cancer treatment(s) are finished?

There are many support groups (both online and in-person) available. You can meet other kidney cancer patients and their families. Support groups can give you, and your family members, valuable, practical information along with much needed personal support.