The Link Between Kidney Cancer and Back Pain

by ANGELA FINLAY

Behind the Ache

Kidney cancer is an especially quiet cancer in its early stages. Many cases are found almost accidentally when scans are given for a different health issue, and major warning signs don't often come until the later stages of the disease. And while kidney cancer is often very treatable, like most other cancers, the prognosis will largely depend on when it is caught. Back pain is a common symptom of advanced kidney cancer, but it could also indicate some early trouble with your kidneys or renal system. Learn when back pain may be more than a simple discomfort, how to treat it and what to do when it occurs with cancer.

When Back Pain Can Indicate Kidney Cancer

It's not unusual for kidney cancer to cause back pain, but then again, back pain is a very common (and often benign) symptom of aging and stress. Any severe pain should be cause for concern, but where you feel the pain will help to determine if your kidneys are to blame:

- **Pain at the site:** Poor posture, muscle strain and spinal problems can cause consistent aches or shooting pains in any area of your back, but the pain of kidney cancer often presents just below the ribs in the back (where the kidneys reside).
- **Flank pain**: Some patients may feel pain in the side, or flank – the area between your upper abdomen and your back. It may be more prominent after a twisting motion, and it will likely only affect one side of the body.
- **Painful lump:** A mass or lump can sometimes be found in the side or lower back. It may be painful to the touch or just be disconcerting to see. In any case, a visible abnormality should be investigated right away.
- **Pain with weakness:** When back pain occurs with weakness in a specific area, you should pay a visit to your doctor. Progressive muscle weakness could be a sign that the tumor has grown or metastasized, and is pressing on nerves.

While certain pains can be serious warning signs, they may also point to nothing more than a mild illness or strain. Only a doctor can determine whether your back pain is something to worry about, and the better you can communicate your symptoms, the better your medical team can get to the bottom of the issue with the appropriate tests and scans.

Managing Pain While Treating Your Cancer

Cancer pain can be traced to a variety of events, which sometimes makes it difficult to control. It may be the growing tumor that's causing the pain, but cancer also triggers a chemical release that can affect nerves and increase pain. In some cases, the cancer treatment itself (surgery, radiation or chemotherapy) damages the nerves and can leave painful scarring.

There are several approaches to treating back pain while you continue with your cancer treatment plan, but not

every method will work well for you. Over-the-counter prescription medications may be able to control your discomfort, or if you need something stronger, your doctor may provide you with an opioid medication. However, don’t discount the benefit of hands-on therapies like acupressure, massage and chiropractic treatment that can target specific areas where nerves or muscles may be suffering.

Be sure to take your doctor’s advice about introducing a new therapy, but try to stay open-minded about different approaches to back pain relief. Pain is a very individual experience, and it can be difficult to predict what will ultimately help you most.