Catch Kidney Cancer Early by Understanding the Symptoms

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Kidney Cancer Symptoms to Be Aware Of

I can remember when I heard that a family friend had been diagnosed with kidney cancer. “Kidney cancer — really? I’ve never heard of that!” It seemed so rare to me — after all, we commonly raise funds for breast cancer, are lectured about smoking because of the risk of lung cancer, and are taught to always wear sun protection to prevent skin cancer.

As it turns out, kidney cancer is much more common than I had initially thought; although it is fairly uncommon in those under the age of 45, it is one of the 10 most common cancers in both men and women — in fact, the lifetime risk of developing kidney cancer is one in 63 (or about 1.6 percent).

Kidney cancer is more common in men than women; it is estimated that in the year 2017, 40,610 new cases in men and 23,380 cases in women will be diagnosed. Ultimately, 14,400 people will succumb to this specific type of cancer.

Although those statistics are sobering and quite scary, that does not mean you shouldn’t be prepared. Learning the risk factors and symptoms of kidney cancer can help — recognizing kidney cancer in its earliest stages can be helpful in regards to cancer prognosis.

Risk Factors for Kidney Cancer

There are quite a few risk factors that may increase your risk of developing kidney cancer, also known as renal cancer. Keep in mind that although a risk factor does increase your risk, it does not guarantee getting cancer.

Risk factors can be broken down into modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors.

Modifiable risk factors for kidney cancer include:

- **Smoking increases risk, as does the amount of cigarettes smoked.** Quitting decreases risk, although it may take several years to bring down the risk level significantly.
- **Obesity.** This can increase hormones that may increase the risk of renal cancer.
- **Exposure to certain workplace toxins may increase the risk of cancer.** Some of these toxins include cadmium, herbicides, and certain organic solvents — especially trichloroethylene.

Non-modifiable risk factors are inevitable and we cannot change these risk factors about ourselves. Risk factors specific to kidney cancer include:

- **Von Hippel-Lindau disease causes tumors and cysts in various locations in the body.** This increases the risk of kidney cancer, especially at a younger age.
- **Hereditary renal cancers (papillary and leiomyoma).** These are specific hereditary cancers that are

linked to genetic changes, the MET and FH genes respectively.
- **Birt Hogg-Dube (BHD) syndrome.** This condition causes benign tumors of the skin but may also increase the risk of renal cancer and other malignancies.
- **Medications usage.** Diuretics may increase the risk of kidney cancer slightly. In addition, the use of phenacetin in the past is known to increase the risk of kidney cancer. However, this pain medication has been off the market for about 20 years in the United States.

Advanced kidney disease, family history of renal cancer, and hypertension are also risk factors to consider.

What Are the Symptoms of Kidney Cancer?

Unfortunately, kidney cancer symptoms typically do not manifest until later on in the disease process. However, if the tumor is large, symptoms may present themselves early on, so it is a great idea to learn the symptoms of kidney cancer so you can recognize them if the need arises.

Common kidney cancer symptoms may include:

- A palpable mass in the back above where the kidney is
- Hematuria (urine in the blood)
- Anemia on a lab draw (low blood count)
- Fever that does not go away
- Unexplained weight loss along with a loss of appetite
- Unexplained low back pain
- Fatigue

Try not to panic if you note these symptoms; these symptoms are more often caused by a different condition than kidney cancer.

For example, hematuria may be caused by a kidney stone. Anemia may be caused by an iron deficiency. However, it is important to not ignore the symptoms — discuss them with your doctor so you can get the proper diagnostic treatments.

Prognosis

Prognosis of kidney cancer is generally dependent on the stage of cancer at diagnosis. The outlook is undoubtedly best when the cancer is present in only the kidney and has not spread to surrounding areas.

However, because kidney cancer often does not manifest symptoms until the cancer has reached a later stage, curing the cancer is not as likely. The treatment goal at this point would be to slow the progression of the cancer.

The Bottom Line

Do what you can to reduce your risk of developing kidney cancer. For example, quitting smoking, losing weight and limiting exposure to certain toxins may decrease your risk. Know the symptoms of kidney cancer so that you can seek a diagnosis at the earliest possible stage.