Understanding the Stages of Pancreatic Cancer

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Pancreatic Cancer Stages: What You Need to Know

In nursing school, we are taught about how to perform nursing research. Part of that education includes using websites that are credible. This is a blessing and a curse for me. When I was twenty-eight weeks pregnant with my youngest son, I was told to wait in the in the ultrasound room while the doctor reviewed the pictures.

The technologist came back in the room and called a doctor in by phone. It appeared that my little baby had a soft tissue mass. Long story short, and I do mean very short, I went home and did the research.

For me, it was comforting to gain knowledge on what this soft tissue mass might be. A week later I had a fetal MRI done, which confirmed my anticipated diagnosis of a lymphatic malformation. Researching your diagnosis can help you understand what is going on in your body and help lessen your anxiety on the road ahead.

Understanding a Pancreatic Cancer Diagnosis

You or family member may have been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Typically, before treatment begins, your doctor will sit down with you and your family, if you choose, and discuss the pancreatic cancer stages.

What is staging? No, you are not going to do a performance for anyone. But on the other hand, that is a good way to look at it. Think of the staging as how big of a show the cancer is playing in your body.

What kind of show might we be seeing? If your cancer’s stage is low, then there will be less of a show. Think of the lesser numbers as an elementary school Christmas concert (stage 1): performance-wise, they're just little kids having fun and singing Jingle Bells. This is one of those moments where the sound of squeaking clarinet pierces the ears, but you are so glad you are there in that moment.

In this case the cancer is small but can be treated, and you are so thankful that you have paid attention to your body.

Consider the higher staging numbers the biggest show ever. Let’s say the higher numbers are like a heavy metal concert ever. Recovering from this is going be harder.

The lower the numbers of the grading of your cancer, the less aggressive it will be. Higher numbers, though, will be very aggressive and difficult to fight.

Determining Pancreatic Cancer Stages

Were you given a little bit of alphabet soup at your appointment? Medical professionals tend to use letters and acronyms, and it is important to understand what they mean. These letters are used to help stage pancreatic cancer.

Let’s break them down and take a look at what questions will be asked to determine the stage of your pancreatic cancer.

- **T (tumor):** How big is it? Has it grown outside the pancreas? Is the tumor near blood vessels?
- **N (lymph nodes):** Are your lymph nodes involved? If so, how many are affected?
- **M (metastasized):** Has the cancer moved to another part of your body? Or, is it only located in your pancreas?

Pancreatic Cancer Stages

All that information is helpful, but you are probably wondering: how am I, or my loved ones, going to feel? Let’s look at each stage of pancreatic cancer.

Stage 1

A tumor that is found in this stage can be up to 4 centimeters. Unfortunately, there may not be any symptoms at this time. With cancer found in this stage outcomes are usually good, as it can be treated early.

Stage 2

A tumor found in this stage is usually greater than 4 centimeters. If it is smaller, it may have also spread to at least 3 lymph nodes.

At stages 1 and 2 your symptoms might be very vague. Some of the symptoms include: fatigue, unintended weight loss, and loss of appetite.

Stage 3

In stage 3 the most important factor is the spreading of cancer cells. Local lymph nodes and blood vessels are affected in stage 3 pancreatic cancer. Remember the concert analogy? We are almost at the heavy metal concert.

Recovery and treatment (i.e., chemotherapy, etc.) is more difficult and is harder on the body. Be prepared to fight. Some of the symptoms in this stage include jaundice or yellowing of the skin, belly or back pain, nausea, and vomiting.

Stage 4

At stage 4, pancreatic cancer is ruthless. In this stage, the cancer has migrated to other organs in the body such as the lungs, brain, stomach, and connective tissue of the organs.

A high percentage of people are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in this stage because symptoms are much more noticeable. The symptoms are very similar as those in stage 3.

The Bottom Line...

Understanding the stages of pancreatic cancer will help reduce your anxiety and help you make decisions about your treatment.