Are You at Risk for Bladder Cancer? Know the Signs

by ALISON RICHARDS

Early Signs of Bladder Cancer

Bladder cancer occurs most often in the lining of the bladder, the pelvic organ which stores urine. The most common form of bladder cancer is known as urothelial carcinoma because it starts in the urothelial cells within the lining of the bladder. It can, however, be present in other parts of the urinary tract, including the ureter. This type of cancer is caused by abnormal cells which grow out of control and form a tumor. Other, rarer forms of bladder cancer are squamous cell carcinomas, adenocarcinoma, small cell carcinoma and sarcoma. These each account for 1% or fewer of all bladder cancer cases.

Bladder cancers are categorized as invasive and non-invasive. Non-invasive bladder cancer is contained within the inner layer of cells, known as the transitional epithelium. Invasive bladder cancer is a more advanced form of the disease, and it occurs when the abnormal cells have grown into the deeper layers of the wall of the bladder.

There is a further sub-categorization of bladder cancers where they are divided into papillary or flat cancers. They form different shapes; while papillary carcinomas grow into fronds, almost like seaweed, towards the hollow part of the bladder, flat carcinomas are a flat shape and don’t grow into the hollow section.

Causes of Bladder Cancer

The main cause of bladder cancer is smoking, due to the carcinogenic chemicals contained in cigarettes. These chemicals are filtered by the kidneys into urine, and as the bladder is a store for urine, they damage the lining and ultimately lead to bladder cancer. Approximately one half of all bladder cancers are caused by smoking.

The second biggest cause of bladder cancer are the harmful industrial chemicals which workers such as painters, truck drivers and printers are exposed to. The chemicals include arsenic as well as those used in the production of certain dyes, paints, leather and rubber products. Other occupations which pose a higher risk of bladder cancer include bus and taxi drivers who are exposed to the harmful chemicals in diesel fumes for prolonged periods whilst driving.

Repeated bladder infections can also lead to bladder cancer, as can certain conditions including bladder stones and gonorrhea.

Genetic factors also influence the risk of getting bladder cancer; White people have double the risk compared with Black or Hispanic people, and men are more likely to get it compared to women.

Previous cancer treatments like chemotherapy and radiotherapy within the pelvis area can also increase the likelihood of getting bladder cancer.

A congenital abnormality or family history of bladder cancer also presents a higher risk of getting it yourself.

Not drinking enough fluids is also a risk factor for bladder cancer.

If you can identify as being at a high-risk of developing bladder cancer, knowing the early signs of bladder cancer is vital.

Early Stage Symptoms of Bladder Cancer

The early signs of bladder cancer can be similar to a bladder infection. These include blood in the urine, which may not be visible but could turn it pink, orange or darker red. You may also need to urinate more frequently than usual, and it may burn when urinating or you may feel the need to stop and start the flow.

You may feel the urge to urinate even when your bladder isn't full or find that you can't pee or very little comes out. These kinds of symptoms can indicate another type of bladder or urinary tract infection, or other minor condition, but it's best to get it checked out by a doctor so that you can receive treatment and rule out anything more serious.

Later Stage Symptoms of Bladder Cancer

If the bladder cancer has progressed to a later stage then symptoms include weight loss, lower back pain, bone pain, the inability to urinate and swollen feet. You may also feel tired and weak. Bear in mind that these symptoms can be associated with a number of different medical conditions, so it doesn't necessarily mean that you have bladder cancer. But you should get checked out by a doctor to rule it out.

How Can You Reduce the Risk of Bladder Cancer?

Lifestyle choices are a factor in the causes of bladder cancer, so you can reduce the risk by making small changes to your daily habits. Giving up smoking is the biggest lifestyle change you can make and will help with many aspects of your health, including reducing the risk of getting bladder cancer.

Other changes include drinking plenty of water, taking care around dangerous chemicals and eating a healthy diet which includes plenty of fruit and green, leafy vegetables. Taking these proactive measures is a positive step, especially if you fall into one of the high-risk groups which are outside your control, such as gender or ethnicity.

Common Treatments for Bladder Cancer

Once diagnosed, there are various treatments available for bladder cancer, depending whether it is at an early or more advanced stage.

The first treatment for bladder cancer is surgery, to remove any cancerous tissue, and this can be done non-invasively by using a resectoscope through the urethra. This enables the surgeon to remove any tumors or cancerous tissues, and it is very common for early stage bladder cancer. A more invasive surgery is a cystectomy where the surgeon removes some or all of the bladder. This can sometimes include removal of nearby lymph nodes if the cancer is more widespread.

Chemotherapy is often used after surgery to kill any remaining cancer cells. It can take two forms; either "systemic" which is administered intravenously and affects the whole body, or "intravesical" where it treats the bladder itself by being given via a tube inserted into the urethra.

Radiation therapy uses high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells and can be a primary treatment for bladder cancer if surgery isn't an option.
Immunotherapy can be used to trigger the body's immune system to attack the cancer cells. This is often used when other treatments have failed to remove the cancer in more advanced forms of the disease. One example is BCG (bacillus Calmette-Guerin) which is administered directly into the bladder via a catheter. It can massively reduce the chance of the cancer returning but also has risks and side effects, like many other forms of treatment.

Early Detection

If detected early, treatment can be very effective, and more options are available to the medical team. That’s why it’s so important to seek advice from your doctor if you experience any of the early signs of bladder cancer.