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Cancer - A disease that Affects Many Among the Indo-Americans Here

By SEWA S. LEGHA, MD

Indian Americans are not well informed about cancer, a disease which causes more than 500,000 deaths in the US every year, a figure, which includes Indians and other Asians. The number of new cancer cases diagnosed in the US is nearly 1.5 million each year. If you can do the math, this translates into survival of 2/3 cases; in other words, 66% of newly diagnosed cases in the US are cured (5-year survival rate) with the modern treatments available in this country. This is not the case, unfortunately, in rest of the world, with survival figures of only 30% to 40% in the developing countries like India.

So what are the odds of developing cancer among the Americans? It is estimated that 40% of

the population will be affected by cancer during their lifetime, which translates to 4 cases out of every 10 individuals. The odds are actually much higher in men (1 in 2) than in the women (1 in 3). Ultimately 25% of all deaths in the US are caused by cancer.

The question often asked by my Indian colleagues is: if cancer is less common of a problem among Indians? The answer to this question is in between a yes and a no. Let me explain. The odds of humans devel-

oping cancer keep going up, as we grow older. In other words, cancer is a disease of Aging (the average age of a patient diagnosed with cancer is 67 years; 65 for women and 68 for men). As the average life span of Indians living in India is nearly 15 years lower than that of Americans (63 years vs. 78 years) cancer in-

the exact reasons for this increased risk are unclear, a longer life span and the western life styles of their adopted country are key contributors to the development of cancer.

It should be pointed out that cancer is not one homogeneous disease but includes a spectrum of many different diseases, with varied course and prognosis, depending on the organ of

mouth, throat, esophagus and cervix lead the way (with breast and colon cancer being much less common in East Asians versus south Asians).

As they adapt to their new environment the pattern of cancers diagnosed among the new immigrants changes toward that of the European race, with breast, colon, lung and prostate cancer becoming increasingly more common. Another feature of cancer among Indians, which I must emphasize, is that cancer develops an average of 10 years earlier (median age 55-58 years) and it is frequently diagnosed at a late stage (usually Stage 3 or 4) when it is much harder to control, thus leading to higher mortality. Although the exact survival data for Cancer among Indians living in the USA is not available, I suspect the survival figures are more like the figures reported from India than those for the Anglo Americans. The main reasons for the poor outcome are due to lateness of diagnosis because of their low health awareness (health literacy). It is therefore the main goal of the Indo-American Cancer Network (IACAN), a local Houston based organization, to provide proper health education and create awareness about early cancer diagnosis by promoting cancer screening and seeking prompt treatment. We hope to accomplish this goal by creating increased awareness through media coverage and by holding community wide educational seminars, the first one of scheduled to take place on Feb 28.

For more information about IACAN call 713-370-3489 or Email: IACANnetwork@gmail.com



opment in India is definitely lower (approximately 1/3 of the US figures is the current estimate) but the total number of new cancer cases diagnosed in India still adds up to be over 1 million cases each year. The odds of developing cancer among Indian Americans are unfortunately more like the mainstream American population than like the Indians living in India. The best current estimates are approximately 2/3 versus the figures for the Anglo-Americans (320 cases versus 490 per 100,000). Although

its origin. The most common cancers among the western populations are: lung, colon, breast and prostate cancer. This is not exactly the case among Asians where the spectrum is much different than that of the European race, including geographic and ethnic variations among the different racial groups such as the East Asians versus South Asians. For example the common cancers among the Chinese and Japanese are those arising from the stomach and liver, whereas among the Indians, cancers of the

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