

## Key facts

- Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide accounting for 8.2 million deaths in 2012.
- An estimated 1.2 million deaths occurred due to cancers in the South-East Asia (SEA) Region alone in 2012, and deaths from cancer are projected to continue rising.
- The Region has an estimated 1.7 million new cancer cases each year.
- Cancers of the breast and the cervix are the two most common cancers among women in the Region.
- Lung and oral cavity cancers are the most common cancers among men in the Region.
- Tobacco use (smoking or chewing) is the single most important risk factor for cancer causing 22% of global cancer deaths and 71% of global lung cancer deaths.
- Many cancers have a high chance of cure if detected early and treated adequately.

## What is cancer?

Cancer, also known as a malignancy or neoplasm, is a generic term used for a large group of diseases that can affect any part of the body. Other terms used are malignant tumours and neoplasms. One defining feature of cancer is the rapid creation of abnormal cells that grow beyond their usual boundaries, and which can then invade adjoining parts of the body and spread to other organs. This process is referred to as metastasis. Metastases are the major cause of death from cancer.

There are over 100 different types of cancers that can affect any organ of the body.

## What causes cancer?

Cancer arises from one single cell. The transformation from a normal cell into a tumour cell is a multistage process, typically a progression from a pre-cancerous lesion to malignant tumors. These changes are the result of the interaction between a person's genetic factors and three categories of external agents, including:

- physical carcinogens, such as ultraviolet and ionizing radiation;
- chemical carcinogens such as asbestos, components of tobacco smoke, aflatoxin (a food contaminant) and arsenic (a drinking water contaminant); and
- biological carcinogens such as infections from certain viruses, bacteria, or parasites.

Ageing is another fundamental factor for the development of cancer. The incidence of cancer rises dramatically with age, most likely due to a buildup of risks for specific cancers that increase with age.

## Risk factors for cancers

Tobacco use, alcohol use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity are the main cancer risk factors worldwide. Chronic infections from hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV) and some types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) are leading risk factors for cancer in low- and middle-income countries. Cervical cancer, which is caused by HPV, is a leading cause of cancer death among women in low-income countries.

## Modifying and avoiding risk factors

More than 30% of cancer deaths could be prevented by modifying or avoiding key risk factors, including:

- tobacco use
- being overweight or obese
- unhealthy diet with low fruit and vegetable intake
- lack of physical activity
- alcohol use
- sexually transmitted HPV-infection
- urban air pollution
- indoor smoke from household use of solid fuels.

## What are the signs and symptoms of cancer?

Most cancers do not exhibit specific signs or symptoms till well advanced stages. Some of the possible signs or symptoms are:

- rapid and significant weight loss
- persistent cough or hoarseness of voice
- a change in bowel habits or blood in the stool
- a swelling or growth anywhere in the body
- a swelling or lump in the breast, changes in the skin texture, discharge from the nipple or change in direction of the nipple
- difficulty in swallowing
- unusual bleeding from any orifices including vagina
- non-healing patches or ulcers in any external part of the body or visible internal part e.g. mouth.

Consult a health-care professional immediately for further evaluation if you notice any of the signs or symptoms listed above.

## How useful are screening tests for cancers?

Many cancers have a high chance of cure if detected early and treated adequately. Checking for cancer (or for conditions that may lead to cancer) in people who have no symptoms is called screening. Screening can help health-care practitioners find and treat some types of cancer early. Two of the most commonly used screening methods for cancer are a pap smear or visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) for cervical cancer and mammography for breast cancer.

## Treatment

Cancer treatment requires a careful selection of one or more intervention, such as surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy. The goal is to cure the disease or considerably prolong life while improving the patient's quality of life. Cancer diagnosis and treatment is complemented by psychological support.

### *Treatment of early detectable cancers*

Some of the most common cancer types, such as breast cancer, cervical cancer, oral cancer and colorectal cancer have higher cure rates when detected early and treated according to best practices.

### *Treatment of other cancers with potential for cure*

Some cancer types, even though disseminated, such as leukaemias and lymphomas in children, and testicular seminoma, have high cure rates if appropriate treatment is provided.

## Palliative care

Palliative care is treatment to relieve, rather than cure, symptoms caused by cancer. Palliative care can help people live more comfortably; it is an urgent humanitarian need for people worldwide with cancer and other chronic fatal diseases. It is particularly needed in places with a high proportion of patients in advanced stages where there is little chance of cure.

Relief from physical, psychosocial and spiritual problems can be achieved in over 90% of advanced cancer patients through palliative care.

## WHO response

WHO and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the specialized cancer research agency of WHO, collaborate with other United Nations organizations and partners to:

- conduct high-level advocacy to increase political commitment for cancer prevention and control
- develop standards and tools to guide the planning and implementation of interventions for prevention, early detection, treatment and care
- develop strategies for cancer prevention and control
- provide technical assistance to Member States for conducting surveillance and research
- strengthen national health systems to deliver cure and care for cancer patients
- facilitate networks of cancer control partners and experts at all levels
- disseminate existing knowledge to facilitate the delivery of evidence-based approaches to cancer control.