Despite losing his hair and several kilos in bodyweight due to chemotherapy, Oloan Gultom remains upbeat that he can beat cancer.

"It all started around a year or so ago. I was coughing all the time and was always feeling weak. Then I started to cough up blood – that was when I decided to go and see a doctor. The doctor told me I need a CT scan and that is when they found a tumor in my lungs. I didn’t know how serious it was or what type of cancer it was.

When the doctor explained everything to me, I was in shock and kept saying: “Are you sure doctor, are you sure – is it really a tumor?” It hit me really hard. I kept thinking – how could I have cancer? How could this happen to me? We are poor. How will I pay for the treatment? I was in a state of shock.

The chemotherapy has been very difficult. At first I could handle it. But the second session was very bad. It felt like my body was ripped apart and torn into shreds. I was very sick for a long time afterwards. But in order to get better I have to go through this.

Gultom had been smoking since he was 15 and had no idea that it could cause lung cancer.

“I started smoking at school about 25 years ago. There was a lot of pressure to smoke back then. If you didn’t smoke, all the other boys would tease you and say you’re not a real man. We all believed that to be a real man, you had to smoke.”

Since being diagnosed with cancer six months ago, Gultom has finally quit smoking.

“When my five-year old son grows up, I do not want him to smoke. I want him to see how much I am suffering. He should learn from my mistakes. He should know how harmful smoking is. I want him to tell others of the dangers of smoking, what it has done to his father and how it causes cancer.”

CANCER: FACT BOX

Cancer kills an estimated 1.1 million people in the WHO South-East Asia Region each year.

Lung and oral cancers are the most common cancer among males in the Region. Cervical and breast cancers are the leading ones among females.

Tobacco use is a major modifiable risk factor for lung cancer. The South-East Asia Region is home to 250 million smokers and an equal number of smokeless tobacco users.

About 30% of cancer deaths are due to the five leading behavioural and dietary risks: high body mass index, low fruit and vegetable intake, lack of physical activity, tobacco use, alcohol use.

Cancer mortality can be reduced if cases are detected and treated early.

CANCER

Oloan Gultom was diagnosed with lung cancer in June 2011. Oloan, who is 40 years old, is married and has a young son. Before the illness, he worked as a tyre fitter, earning around US$ 4 a day. The family is now struggling to make ends meet.