

LYMPHOMA...

There is *help* and *hope*

According to SOCH oncologist **Dr. Sara McGee**, people are living longer with cancer than ever before, and their quality of life has improved dramatically. She cites developments in the treatment for lymphoma as an example of this positive trend.

“According to the American Cancer Society’s survival statistics for Hodgkin lymphoma, 85 percent of patients are alive at five years, and 76 percent are beyond the 10-year survival mark,” she said.

According to Dr. McGee, lymphoma is a general term used to describe a group of cancers that originate in the body’s lymphatic system, which includes the lymph nodes and lymphatic tissues. Lymphomas are divided into two categories, Hodgkin lymphoma and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

“Hodgkin lymphoma is set apart from other types of the disease by the presence of an abnormal cell called the Reed-Sternberger cell,” said Dr. McGee.

“Lymphomas appear differently under the microscope, and are treated differently.”

Hodgkin lymphoma is most common in people between 15 and 35 years old, and is more prevalent in boys. In contrast, non-Hodgkin lymphoma tends to strike those 70 and older, although the disease can occur at any age.

“The common theme among lymphomas is a change in a lymphocyte, a type of white blood cell. When the lymphocyte becomes cancerous, it begins to multiply, eventu-

ally crowding out healthy cells and creating tumors which enlarge the lymph nodes or other sites in the body,” explained Dr. McGee.

Thanks to improved treatment, the five-year survival rate for non-Hodgkin lymphoma has risen from 47 percent in 1974 to 60 percent in 2001. “Five-year survival rates for non-Hodgkin lymphoma depend on the lymphoma type, stage, age of the patient and other characteristics such as genetics.”

Unfortunately, Dr. McGee sees many cases of lymphoma that have advanced to late-stage disease, making treatment less successful. While there is no routine screening available for early diagnosis of lymphoma, she emphasizes the importance of getting a routine physical, and paying attention to changes in the body.

“The most common symptom of both categories of lymphoma is painless swelling of the lymph nodes in the neck, armpit, groin, chest or abdomen,” explained Dr. McGee. “While swollen lymph nodes could simply indicate a treatable infection, further diagnostic tests should be considered if the swelling does not subside after treatment with antibiotics.”

According to Dr. McGee, additional symptoms of non-Hodgkin lymphoma may include loss of appetite, weight loss, nausea, vomiting, indigestion, abdominal pain or bloating. Other

symptoms can include pressure or pain down the lower back, extending down one or both legs; itching, bone pain, coughing, headaches, chest congestion, night sweats and recurring fever.

“Since many of these symptoms mimic other conditions, people might dismiss what their body is trying to tell them,” she said. “The best way to diagnose lymphoma is to biopsy an involved lymph node and evaluate the cells under a microscope.”

If lymphoma is diagnosed, the next step will usually include imaging studies, such as a PET Scan, CT Scan or MRI to learn if the lymphoma has spread to other parts of the body. Patients with non-Hodgkin lymphoma may also have a blood test to determine if lymphoma cells are in the blood stream and marrow. Results of these studies are used to stage the disease, and develop a treatment plan accordingly.

“Treatment will usually involve radiation therapy, chemotherapy or a combination of the two, depending on the type of lymphoma. Some lymphomas also respond to antibody therapy that targets specific receptors on the lymphoma cells,” said Dr. McGee. “We also take into consideration the patient’s age and overall health.”

At the Cancer Center at SOCH, patients have access to comprehensive treatment protocols including chemotherapy administration and radiation therapy delivered via sophisticated, technically advanced equipment.



Sara McGee, MD is a board-certified, fellowship-trained oncologist on the medical staff of SOCH.

For more information about *lymphoma* or the *Cancer Center at SOCH*, call *SOCHConnect* at 609-978-3400.

