Oklahoma State Department of Health

COMMUNITY CANCER ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET

Concern about a high occurrence of cancer in a community often begins when a family member or someone's co-worker, neighbor, or friend is diagnosed with cancer. This close contact with cancer often brings an awareness of others who have cancer and a desire to answer the question, "Why?" The following information might help answer some questions about cancer.

Cancer is common. It is not unusual to know several people in a neighborhood or workplace who have cancer. The American Cancer Society says that one in three people will get cancer during their lifetime. More than 20,000 Oklahomans are diagnosed with cancer each year and cancer is the second leading cause of death, following heart disease.

Cancer is not just one disease. Cancer is a group of more than 100 diseases characterized by uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. Lung, prostate, breast, colon, and melanoma cancers account for nearly half of all the cases among adults in Oklahoma. Lymphocytic and brain cancers account for about one-third of the cases among children. Because these cancers are most common, it is not unusual for several cases of cancer to occur in a given location.

Cancer has many different causes. Each type of cancer has certain factors or combination of factors associated with it. These factors include lifestyle (such as tobacco use, sun exposures, or unhealthy diets), genetics (such as a family history of cancer), or exposure to cancer-causing agents (such as some types of viruses, medicines, and chemicals). The factors often act together to increase risk of cancer and this relationship is not fully understood for most types of cancer.

Cancers today are usually related to events that happened many years ago. The time between exposures to factors and the diagnosis of cancer often makes it difficult to track what caused the cancer. Cancer can take 10 to 30 years to develop from the time of exposure. In a mobile society like ours, people with cancer who live or work close together might not have been in the community or workplace long enough for a common exposure to have caused their cancer.

The risk of having cancer increases with age. While cancers occur in people of all ages, nearly 90%of all cancers are diagnosed in persons 50 years and older. We expect more cancers in communities, neighborhoods, and workplaces where the population has a higher proportion of people over the age of 50.

A community cancer assessment starts with gathering information. The first step is to determine if a high number of cancers occurred among people who live or work together. The next step is to exam if the cases are of one type of cancer, a rare type of cancer, or occur among an age group that not usually affected by that type of cancer. Next, it is determined if there is an environmental exposure that has the potential to cause the reported type of cancer. A plausible amount of time between exposure and cancer development, defined geographic area, and population at risk are other pieces of information used in the assessment. If a higher occurrence of cancer is found, statistical tests can determine if the elevation might be due to chance. If a true cancer cluster is identified, determining "why" the cancer risk is higher in a particular population requires extensive research.

More information is available. These websites are user friendly and have good information on specific topics related to cancer cluster.

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) ToxFAQs has information on contaminants found at hazardous waste sites at http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp
- American Cancer Society has information on various cancer topics at www.cancer.org
- International Agency for Cancer Research provides information on classes of substances and their carcinogenicity at http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/index.php
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes cancer registries at http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/npcr/value/index.htm

Contact the Office of the State Epidemiologist at 405.271.7637 to request a community cancer assessment.