

Pancreatic cancer has been at the forefront ever since it claimed the life of Apple cofounder and CEO, Steve Jobs, in 2011. Unfortunately, like Jobs, the majority of pancreatic cancer patients show only vague symptoms of the disease, so most are only diagnosed after advanced stages when chances of survival are reduced.

It is one of the worst cancers, so learning about it and recognising the early signs can help save your life. About 95 percent of people with pancreatic cancer die from it because during the early stages, when the tumour would be easiest treatable, there are usually no symptoms. It tends to be discovered at advanced stages when abdominal pain or jaundice may occur.

Jaundice causes no discomfort, but does cause yellowing of the skin and eyes. Jaundice develops when there are excessive levels of bilirubin in the bloodstream, or when a liver bile duct becomes blocked by a tumour. It is important to report these immediately to your doctor.

While Jobs seems to have received the best care possible, some conventional oncologists question the decision to perform a liver transplant, stating that this procedure and the drugs he had to take were, perhaps, a fatal mistake.

Pancreatic cancer is a disease caused by damage to the DNA which is often referred to as a mutation from mom or dad, or can develop as we age. Not everyone with an inherited predisposition will get cancer. The second way we can damage our DNA is with our behaviour, for example smoking.

From this understanding it should be clear that not everyone with an inherited predisposition will get cancer. Instead, since individuals with an inherited cancer syndrome are born with one copy of the cancer associated gene, they are more likely to get cancer.

Jobs underwent surgery to remove his tumour in 2004 and died in 2011, his seven-year survival after treatment is consistent with the average survival for these kinds of tumours.

Prevention

The second way we can damage our DNA is with our behaviour. DNA is Deoxyribonucleic acid a molecule that carries the genetic instructions used in our growth, development, functioning and reproduction of all known living organisms and many viruses. DNA and RNA are nucleic acids; alongside proteins, lipids and complex carbohydrates, they are one of the four major types that are essential for all known forms of life. For example, the carcinogens (cancer causing chemicals) in cigarette smoke can damage our DNA. If the carcinogens damage a key cancer-associated gene in a cell in the pancreas, then that cell may grow into a cancer, so don't smoke, and avoid people who do.

Over 80% of pancreatic cancers develop between the ages of 60 and 80 years. 8% of cancers are related to obesity.

Diets high in meats, cholesterol, fried foods and nitrosamines may increase risk, while diets high in fruits and vegetables reduce risk. The vitamin folate may be protective.