



1 February 2011

EARLY DETECTION IS VITAL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CANCER

International statistics show mortality rates for cancer patients have improved dramatically over the past 50 years. The five year survival rate for breast cancer has increased from 60% to 91%; prostate cancer has improved from 43% to 99.9% and malignant melanoma of the skin - the most dangerous form of skin cancer - has improved from 49% to 92.9%.

According to Dr Dominique Stott, executive at PPS Insurance, the main cause of this improvement is primarily due to improved means of early detection and better forms of treatment available. However, she says there is still a huge need to educate ordinary people around the benefits of screening tests, such as medical examinations, blood and other tests (such as colonoscopies and XR and CT scans), which all help in the early detection and therefore earlier treatment of the disease.

Dr Stott says that although medical practitioners are divided in their opinions, guidelines for doing screening tests are suggested by International cancer study organisations but depend on the risk profile of the patient.

“The risk profile of the patient includes age, sex, family and genetic history, smoking status, alcohol intake and risky behavior patterns such as excessive sun exposure. By combining these various factors, a medical practitioner will put together appropriate tests for that patient. A patient who does not have a family history or known genetic abnormality would be advised to do the following:

Women over 50 should have an annual mammogram and clinical examination. If there is a family history of breast or ovarian cancer this should commence at an earlier age on the advice of the doctor. Breast cancer is the second highest cause of cancer deaths amongst women in South Africa.

Men over 50 should have a Prostate Specific Antigen blood test with a digital examination. Prostate cancer is the third highest cause of cancer deaths amongst men in South Africa. Both sexes over 50 should have a colonoscopy every 5 years. If there has been a family history this should be more frequent and at an earlier age. Bowel cancer is the 6th leading cause of cancer deaths in South Africa across both sexes.

Women aged 25 to 60 should have annual Pap tests as cervix cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths amongst women in South Africa.

Both sexes should annually have a skin examination for skin cancer especially if they have had excessive exposure to sun in their childhood or youth. The incidence of malignant melanoma in South Africa is increasing largely due to increased sun exposure. Although it causes only 1% of cancer deaths these would be preventable should early detection have occurred.

People who have a high risk of cancer (two or more first degree relatives – parent or siblings) who have had cancer, people who have had cancer in the past or those who have genetic changes which are linked to cancer should be checked more often.

Graham Anderson, Principal Officer at Profmed Medical Scheme adds that these tests should always be conducted only on the advice of the doctor as false results may lead to unnecessary anxiety or lack of early detection of cancer if results are falsely negative for cancer.

He says that there is no one blood test which is the gold standard as yet for diagnosing cancer. "What these blood tests (tumour markers) can do is indicate that there may be an abnormality present and further testing such as invasive biopsies are required. In the future one hopes that a comprehensive diagnostic tool for cancer will be developed as this would save many lives and prevent much heartache."

In the mean-time, he says any new symptoms such as a chronic cough, changes in a mole or unusual lumps, should be investigated immediately by a medical practitioner.