

FIGHTING CANCER

Our cancer survival rate will only increase with new developments in detection and treatment, but we each also need to do our part in preventing cancer in ourselves.

ACCORDING to the World Health Organization (WHO), cancer is the second leading cause of death worldwide.

In 2018, it was responsible for an estimated 9.6 million deaths, which amounted to around one in six deaths globally.

These statistics are significant and can be terrifying, which leads to the prevalent negative attitude and fatalistic belief that nothing can be done about cancer.

However, these facts do not present the whole picture.

Subang Jaya Medical Centre consultant urologist Datuk Dr Tan Hui Meng says that while it is true that one in four Malaysians will develop cancer by the time they are 75 years old, the cancer survival rate will increase as the country becomes more developed, as the Health Ministry revealed recently.

He says, "The current cancer survival rate is around 80% in developed countries, but less than 50% in poorer countries.

"This is because a lot of resources are needed to fully treat cancer, including multidisciplinary treatments such as chemotherapy, radiology and immunotherapy.

"As a middle-income country, Malaysia has not reached that stage yet, but our cancer survival rate will definitely increase with adequate resources."

Nevertheless, the global attitude towards cancer can still be negative.

Thus, this year's World Cancer Day, which fell on Feb 4, is themed "I Am and I Will" and seeks to counter these notions, and instead, promote how personal actions can be powerful and impactful in reducing the global impact of cancer.

Understanding the enemy

Like any unfounded belief, the resigned attitude towards battling cancer comes from a lack of knowledge about the disease.

Cancer occurs when a cell or a group of cells in the body mutates and grows out of control.

These cell mutations can start in any part of the body.

It is common for people to believe that all types of cancer are the same, but every single type is different as each occurs in different types of cells and mutates differently.

Some cancers may react more aggressively than others, while some, when treated early, allow better chances of survival.

There can also be differences within a single type of cancer. For example, leukaemia can be



Dr Tan notes that cancer is so hard to beat that multiple experts are sometimes needed to treat one patient.

acute (fast-growing) or chronic (slow-growing).

However, just because some cancers can be treated does not mean that people should take cancer lightly.

Dr Tan explains that when a cell turns cancerous, it will evolve rapidly to ensure its survival.

He refers to the HeLa cancer cell, which is an immortal cell line still used in current scientific research.

This line was derived from cervical cancer cells extracted from a cancer patient in 1951, and the cell is still well and thriving today.

"This is why it is very hard for us to 'cure' cancer, even after decades of research.

"Each time you think you have eradicated cancer, if even 1% is still alive, it will evolve against treatment, rendering the initial treatment ineffective.

"The only time a cancer cell dies is when the patient dies."

Taking the fight into our hands

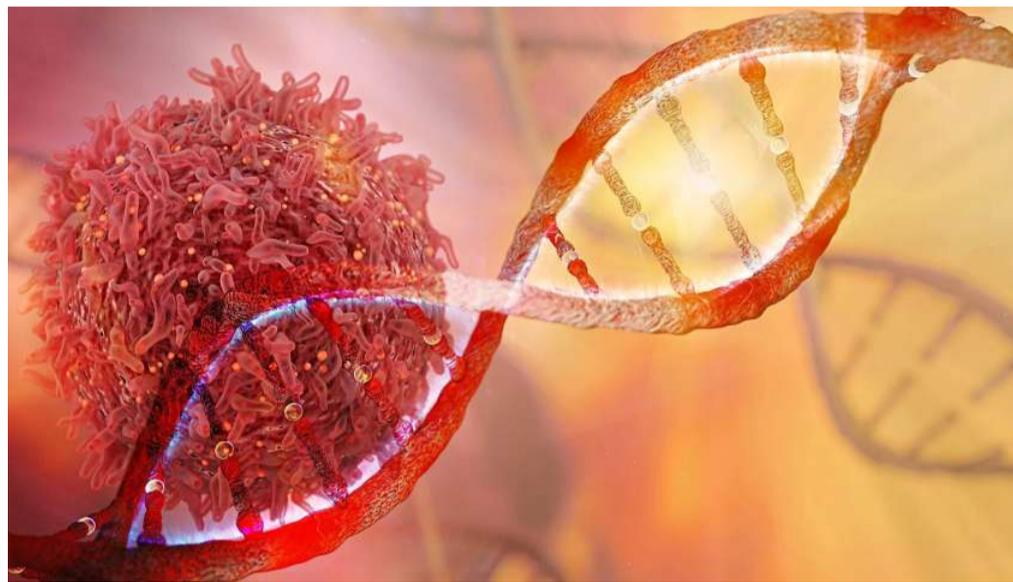
From these facts, cancer is a very complicated disease to deal with.

How then can we as a society contribute to the fight against cancer?

> Leave cancer treatment to the cancer experts

Dr Tan advises cancer patients to adhere to treatments given by specialist doctors instead of trying to self-medicate with alternative treatments.

"Cancer is so hard to beat that



Cancer occurs when a cell or group of cells mutate and grow out of control, escaping even the defences of our immune system.

we need multidisciplinary teams, because even experts are not specialised in every single type of cancer.

"Even until now, we haven't been able to fully cure cancer.

"Don't blindly listen to your relatives or neighbours on alternative treatments even if they used to be cancer patients.

"Your condition is different from theirs and trying alternative treatments could worsen your condition, in addition to adding to your confusion."

> Avoid cancer triggers

The development of cancer depends on genetics and the environment.

Some people may have hereditary cancer-causing genes, while some may live or work in areas with high carcinogenic elements.

Hence, while you cannot pick your family members, it is wise to look into your family history of cancer and take action to prevent the occurrence of cancer.

For example, if you discover you are at high risk of skin cancer, try to avoid sun exposure as much as possible and implement preventative measures such as using sunscreen and going for skin cancer screening.

Other examples of carcinogens in our everyday lives are smoking, charred food, preserved food and air pollution.

It is also important to note that

screening for every cancer possible out there is not the way to go either.

Cancer screening can be costly and can cause unnecessary stress and anxiety, especially if you are not at risk for certain cancers.

The best early detection method is to instead, be aware of changes in your own body.

If you detect any abnormalities with your body, seek medical attention as soon as possible.

> Build up your immune system

Having a good immune system indirectly affects the chances of someone getting cancer.

Immunologist Professor Tim Elliott from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom illustrated the process in a Cancer Research UK article published last year, titled *Science Surgery: Why doesn't the immune system attack cancer cells?*

According to Prof Elliot, our immune system does attack cancer cells.

"(The immune system) is recognising and destroying little cancers as they develop all the time.

"If we didn't have an immune system, we would be developing cancer a lot more often," he says.

However, as time goes on and cancer cells continue to evolve, they can develop genetic changes that help them escape the immune system.

Some cancer cells change and grow in number so fast that the immune system cannot adapt and keep them at bay.

Hence, it is beneficial to keep your immune system strong so it is in its best shape to fight against cancer cells for as long as possible.

Dr Tan recommends eating fresh unprocessed foods, instead of preserved foods that may contain carcinogens, while also leading a healthy lifestyle through regular exercise.

"Exercising regularly is a good habit and preventative measure.

"It has been shown that people with prostate cancer who exercise regularly have lower recurrence rates."

'I Am and I Will'

As the community strives to understand cancer and how humans can prevent and fight against it, the hopelessness of getting cancer is replaced with empowerment.

The understanding of how powerful and impactful one's efforts can be towards reducing the global impact of cancer will, in turn, become someone else's support in their time of need.

Hence, we should not live in fear of cancer, but rather work to fight against cancer through healthy living, educating others and supporting healthcare personnel and researchers.

BE INFORMED AND COMMUNICATE

THREE years ago, Johnny Hoo held a demanding job that required frequent travelling.

He was also a smoker and led an unhealthy lifestyle that included having insufficient rest and little to no exercise.

In August 2017, he began coughing persistently, but continued to work, thinking that it was merely the flu.

However, after countless visits to the doctor and medication, Hoo received news that changed his life forever – he was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer.

Active communication is key

After Hoo was admitted into the hospital, he realised that a patient will receive the best care if they have the ability to communicate

well with the hospital staff responsible for their care.

"My oncologist made the effort to listen and explain in layman's terms about my condition to me, and it made things easier for everyone.

"However trivial it may seem, it is crucial that you can communicate well with your doctor and hospital staff," he says.

Hoo found it helpful to have family members with him when the doctor explained the procedures needed for cancer treatment.

"When I was first diagnosed, I was confused because everything was so new to me.

"It was my family members who asked most of the questions to better understand how to care for me."

That said, he recognises that

every patient has the responsibility of ensuring they receive the best care.

He advises, "Always discuss and seek advice from your doctor and never listen to 'home doctors', including friends and family members, as it will only confuse you more."

Taking the initiative

Hoo adds that patients must take the initiative to be well informed on the condition they are being treated for.

If one undergoes treatment with unreasonable expectations, he or she will always be unsatisfied and suspicious of the treatments provided.

There will be bound to be times when, as a patient, you feel unsure about the care you are receiving

from the hospital.

If you do not know who to reach out to, Hoo suggests speaking with your immediate doctors and nurses as they are the ones providing the first line of care.

He emphasises that patients and non-patients alike should take care of their health by living healthy lifestyles.

He also recommends going for thorough check-ups at hospitals.

"Most people I know are unaware that clinics cannot conduct all the necessary tests for a comprehensive check-up.

"I had been doing regular check-ups all along, but was only diagnosed with late stage cancer after undergoing investigations at a hospital.

"Therefore, I strongly recommend you undergo check-ups at a hospital."



According to Hoo, good communication with the hospital staff looking after you is key to getting the best care.