

Script – Print – Rare Cancer Cuts Down Fashion Designer Cardiac Angiosarcoma in the Spotlight Following the Death of Virgil Abloh

The fashion industry was rocked November 28 by the news that designer Virgil Abloh died at age 41 following a two-year battle with an uncommon cancer called cardiac angiosarcoma.

Born and raised in Rockford, Illinois, Abloh was a bigfoot in the fashion world. He was the artistic director of Louis Vuitton's menswear collection and founder of his own fashion house, Off-White. In 2018, Abloh was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine.

Cardiac sarcomas are tumors that form in the heart. According to the National Cancer Institute Center for Cancer Research, for every one million people, one will be diagnosed with angiosarcoma per year in the U.S. Angiosarcomas make up about 1% to 2% of all sarcomas.

"Having a primary cancer of the heart is extremely rare," says Dr. Iftekhar Ahmad, an oncologist for OSF HealthCare. "In this case a primary angiosarcoma, typically if they do occur, it's on the right side of the heart in the right atrium. They, unfortunately, have a very poor prognosis. They are typically diagnosed at a later stage and it's already spread. Even in cases when they've been diagnosed early, curing them is very difficult."

Most cardiac angiosarcomas obstruct the blood flow to and from the heart, which can lead to swelling of the feet, legs, and ankles. Other symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath and chest pain. The causes of this rare cancer are unknown, but Dr. Ahmad says that lifestyle choices such as smoking, obesity and heavy alcohol use may play a part in any cancer diagnosis.

"Unexplained shortness of breath is probably the most common," says Dr. Ahmad. "Sometimes you have chest pains. It mimics typical heart problems and that's where a cardiologist gets involved. Typically it's found on an electrocardiogram or an ultrasound. Sometimes they'll do CT MRI of the heart for it as well to get a better idea of where the mass is. The symptoms are non-specific in general."

Dr. Ahmad says most people afflicted with cardiac angiosarcoma tend to be 60 years old or younger.

"What this tells us is illness can happen at any age, whether it's cancer or not," says Dr. Ahmad. "The take home point is as you get older you do want to have regular checkups. In our society we tend to once we leave our pediatrician we don't find a primary care physician until we're 50. That's the reality. People get busy, people feel fine and that's understandable. But the reality is there are some subtle things that physicians can pick up and anything you can pick up, whether it's cancer or not, is always a better outcome."

Unfortunately, treatment options are limited for people diagnosed with cardiac angiosarcoma. Dr. Ahmad says chemotherapy and radiation therapy have limited impact on this type of cancer. Most treatment options start with surgery and that's even an iffy proposition due to the location of the tumor. By the time the cancer is diagnosed, in many cases the disease has metastasized.

Abloh opted to keep his cancer battle private during the past two years. Dr. Ahmad says that's not uncommon – especially for someone who is so well known.

“The thing about cancer is it tends to impact all parts of your life," says Dr. Ahmad. "Sometimes it can take over your life. Some individuals are opposed to that happening. What they try to do is separate it. This is the disease part, I'll deal with it, but this is the life part. It's not so surprising. I've encountered patients who are the same. Their family may not know. Society tends to view you or treat you differently when you have an illness so they don't want that type of attention.”

For more information on cancer programs and services, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).