

Script – Print – Putting a face on pancreatic cancer

Jerry Springer, known for hosting a tabloid talk show best remembered for its over-the-top antics, died April 27 after battling pancreatic cancer. Like other celebrities who've fought pancreatic cancer, such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Patrick Swayze, and Alex Trebek, Springer's death cast a spotlight on a disease that is not often talked about.

"The pancreas is a gland in your upper abdomen that lies behind your stomach," says Dr. Eileen O'Halloran, a surgical oncologist with OSF HealthCare. "It has two main functions; it excretes enzymes that helps you digest your food and helps you control your blood sugar by secreting insulin. Pancreatic cancer occurs when any cell or group of cells in the pancreas grow out of control and create a tumor."

Pancreatic cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. It's responsible for about 3% of all cancers and about 7% of all cancer deaths. About 64,000 people will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer this year. It is more common in men than in women and there are no screening tests for pancreatic cancer.

According to Dr. O'Halloran, the signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer can be vague. There are many people who exhibit no symptoms at all; a tumor might be found on a CT scan when a person is admitted to the Emergency Department for some other reason like a car accident or kidney stones.

However, symptoms such as "painless jaundice," discolored stools, dark urine, back pain and weight loss are all things that should prompt a visit to the doctor.

"We really haven't identified a cause of pancreatic cancer," says Dr. O'Halloran. "Of all the pancreatic cancers about 5 to 10% are found in families, are associated with a genetic cause. The other 95% occur sporadically without a good cause. We have found risk factors – those who smoke have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer, those with a history of pancreatitis or inflammation of the pancreas, whether it's due to alcohol intake or gallstones have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer and there is some association with obesity and pancreatic cancer."

According to Dr. O'Halloran, the treatment options for pancreatic cancer depend on the size of the tumor, the tumor's location and if it has spread. The first action is to determine the staging of the cancer, which includes scans and blood work. Treatment may include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation or a combination of all three.

"The treatments that we are proposing to patients are ever-evolving," she adds. "There are clinical trials, and there are new pathways in treatments that we are testing on a daily basis to see if there is something we can do to really improve the long-term survival of these patients."

Dr. O'Halloran adds that by going public with the disease, celebrities help make the country more aware of pancreatic cancer, including the medical community, and that aggressive treatment remains the best course of action. For more information, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).