

Script – Print – Putting a Face on Pancreatic Cancer

Alex Trebek's Death Creates Awareness of Serious Disease

Alex Trebek, the affable host of the game show, Jeopardy!, for the past 37 years, stunned the world in March, 2019, with news that he had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. Like other celebrities who've fought pancreatic cancer, such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Patrick Swayze, Trebek's public battle cast a spotlight on a disease that is not often talked about. Trebek lost his battle to cancer on Nov. 8, at the age of 80.

"The pancreas is a gland in your upper abdomen that lies behind your stomach," said Dr. Eileen O'Halloran, surgical oncologist, 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."

According to the American Cancer Society, pancreatic cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. It's responsible for about 3 percent of all cancers in the country and about 7 percent of all cancer deaths. It is more common in men than in women. There are no screening tests for pancreatic cancer.

"Pancreatic cancer really is not that common," said Dr. Eileen O'Halloran, surgical oncologist, OSF HealthCare. "The projections for 2020 is about 56,000 cases will occur in the United States. So when you think about a percentage of a population, it's really not that common. There have been other estimations that say a single person of average risk has a lifetime risk of about 1 to 1 ½ percent of developing the disease."

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," said Dr. Eileen O'Halloran, surgical oncologist, OSF HealthCare. "Of all the pancreatic cancers about 5 to 10 percent are found in families, are associated with a genetic cause. The other 95 percent 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," said Dr. Eileen O'Halloran, surgical oncologist, OSF HealthCare. "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 his disease, Alex Trebek has helped 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](#).