

CANCER AMONG SPOUSES

A recent article by Wallach et al from Israel and published in Cancer has evaluated cancer occurring in spouses.

Certain cancers run in families because of genetic predisposition. Other cancers may be increased based upon environmental factors such as smoking, diet or shared similar social activities. Some cancers may occur together for no known or obvious reason.

In this analysis from Israel, 6,558 cancer patients between the years of 1978 and 1992 were interviewed in regards to any cancer in spouses. In 195 couples, both husband and wife had developed cancer.

Information as to diagnosis, date of marriage, date of birth, site of cancer, type of cancer was obtained and evaluated.

Eighty-eight percent of the records were thus evaluated. The age range of diagnosis of husbands was 67.1 years and the mean age for wives was 67.7 years. The mean age at marriage was 27.2 years for men and 22.8 years for women. Couples were married for 35.6 years on average prior to the first cancer in the family.

Within the first nine years of marriage, 2.7% of cancers first occurred. The time between cancers was 7.7 years on average in 98 families when the first cancer was diagnosed in the wife and 9.1 years when the first cancer was diagnosed in the husband. In 17 families (8.8%) both diagnoses were made the same year.

Colon cancer among both spouses increased significantly in both men and women whereas rectal cancer was lower than expected. Prostate cancer was higher than expected in the men and breast cancer was higher than expected in the women - when the entire group was evaluated as a whole.

The same sites of cancer were observed in 13 couples. This was expected only in 6 couples. Combinations including stomach/stomach, colon/colon and brain/brain were found to occur significantly more frequently than expected, it was noted.

Different sites were observed for colon/liver with 3 observed and 0.1 expected; colon/breast with 17 observed and 6 expected; colon/uterus with 2 observed and 0.03 expected; pleura/colon with 3 observed and 0.03 expected and prostate/breast with 18 observed and 6 expected.

The authors concluded that "The foremost observation is that the distribution of cancer sites for husbands and for wives differs from that of the general Israeli population."

The authors didn't find an increased frequency of cancers associated with tobacco or alcohol use. They felt that the greater number of cancers was limited to colon, breast and prostate and are, in fact, the three most common screening subjects for cancer in that country. The question raised was whether increased awareness was the responsible element in finding these cancers at this time.

The authors concluded that "Shared risk factors in married couples could play some role in the incidence of cancer. However, the contribution of earlier awareness and better diagnosis cannot be ruled out."

Does cancer awareness and prevention help? The authors certainly believe it may. When one spouse is diagnosed with cancer, the pair may well change their routine or such methods to improve health. This might explain the pattern of cancer found in spouses.