

Males shouldn't ignore prostate health

by Mark Pavilons

Prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer and third leading cause of cancer death among Canadian males.

That should set off some alarm bells.

It's Prostate Cancer Awareness Month (PCAM) at The Canadian Cancer Society (CCS). It's something all husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and even sons should take notice of.

A tremendous amount of progress has been made in the fight against prostate cancer, but it's still the most commonly diagnosed cancer. On average, 91% of individuals diagnosed with prostate cancer are expected to survive at least five years after their diagnosis. Survival is nearly 100% if the cancer is detected before it has spread.

Roughly 27,900 men in Canada are expected to be diagnosed with prostate cancer this year. It's one of the least preventable cancers, making advancements in prostate cancer treatment so important.

That's why hospitals, research centres and the CCS are all investing in research to ensure people can live longer, fuller lives. Investments in the best prostate cancer research in Canada has helped to cut the prostate cancer death rate by 50% since 1995 through improvements in early detection and treatment.

The CCS is pushing for more accessibility to the testing, including the digital rectal exam (DRE), prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test and prostate biopsy, which can be used to diagnose or rule out prostate cancer.

Eight provinces and three territories cover the cost of the tests by referral without requiring signs and symptoms, except Ontario and British Columbia. The cost of the PSA test is currently paid out-of-pocket by asymptomatic individuals in British Columbia and Ontario who would like to take the test after having a conversation with their doctor about the benefits and limitations.

A 2021 poll commissioned by the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS) found that 9 in 10 Canadians (90%) express support for increased government health care spending on the test for early detection of prostate cancer with physician referral. CCS believes Canadians should have equitable access to a PSA test for early detection of prostate cancer without having to pay out-of-pocket when they have a physician referral, regardless of where they live in Canada.

During my ongoing battle and treatment for prostate cancer, I have avoided reading details, data and life expectancy projections. No doubt they paint a rather bleak picture. Imagine being told you have 3-5 years to live!

My oncologists say they are attacking it on several fronts - hormone therapy, immunotherapy and my current stint of chemo. A CT scan following the chemo will help tell my tale, but my medications will likely continue for the rest of my life. I've also explored several natural remedies and supplements that may help. I keep an open mind, and naturopathic approaches have been used for centuries. What have I got to lose?

A recent phone call from an oncologist at Princess Margaret said they will continue to stand by and be available for future treatment.

I did a stint for a GUNS trial for six months which seemed to work at the time. But alas, the cancer re-emerged. This treatment has been used in the U.S. for more than a decade and yet it's still being tested here.

She, too, said research is aggressive in this area and new trials, drugs and procedures are constantly being uncovered. That's good news, I suppose.

Princess Margaret is a world leader in cancer research and their team of prostate cancer specialists are likely second to none. They share a special bond with the Stronach Cancer Centre out of Southlake in Newmarket, so I was fortunate to get my treatments and care in this neck of the woods. Many of the oncologists are part of a close-knit group in this speciality. I've always felt I was in good hands, at PM and Southlake.

While it was once typically a disease found in men in their 70s and beyond, the rates are increasing in younger males, some as young as their mid-40s. I was diagnosed at 59.

You wouldn't know I'm infested with this disease, or taking chemo, from my pleasant demeanor.

Surprisingly, I haven't felt horribly ill at all during this time and I only missed a handful of days at work (one was for my surgery).

And for me, staying busy is the key. I went through several bouts of depression and deep sadness about my plight. But when it became obvious, my wife and family told me to change my attitude. They were right, of course.

Suffering, inwardly and outwardly, isn't helpful. So, like turning a switch, I just went with the flow and take every day, week, month as it comes.

Sure, there are emails, calls, appointments, injections and pills, but that is my new normal.

But I'm anything but. Some would argue I was far from normal to being with!

Removing the heaviness of it all is rather uplifting. I try to enjoy the little things and not worry about dishes, scrubbing toilets and taking out the trash, even though I still do those regularly.

I still find grocery shopping to be a depressing experience, but I'm sure most of us do these days.

While there's no cure for my cancer, those specialists in my corner say they will throw everything they have at it. And should any new drug trials or treatments arise, I'll be part of them.

Everyone tells me to be hopeful, stay strong and that you've got this. Kind works to be sure.

But really, my fate lies in the hands of my caregivers, modern medicine and God Himself.

But maintaining a sense of hope, staying positive and attaining a level of calm and serenity in the face of all of this, is equally important.

Men, get tested and don't ignore this.

To all those going through this, you are not alone. There are knowledgeable and passionate people in your corner.