

Could It Be Cancer?

Cancer usually has no symptoms in its early stages. When it grows large enough to produce telltale signs, those can be confused with the aches, pains and stresses of everyday life.

Check out the following six symptoms for information on when you can breathe a sigh of relief, and when you should head straight to your doctor. If a symptom does turn out to be cancer, the earlier you are diagnosed and treated, the better chance you have of being cured.

Weight loss. Most people, especially those past early adulthood, don't lose weight easily. If you're losing a significant amount of weight without trying and aren't missing meals because of a heavy work schedule or some other easily explainable reason, see your doctor. According to , unexplained weight loss is often the first noticeable sign of cancer. About 40 percent of cancer victims experience unexplained weight loss at the time of diagnosis, and up to 80 percent of those with advanced cancer suffer weight loss.

A rapid, unexplained weight loss of 10 pounds or more, or losing more than 10 percent of your total body weight in a three- to six-month period is cause for concern. Weight loss is often one of the first signs of pancreatic, stomach, esophageal or lung cancer.

Persistent cough. We're into the fall allergy season, and the winter cold/flu season isn't far off, along with their attending sniffles that can cause an aggravating cough. If the cough lasts longer than a month after your other symptoms abate, however, get yourself checked out. Coughs can be a symptom of lung, esophageal or thyroid cancer. Even if your cough isn't caused by cancer, it may be another problem, such as bronchitis or acid reflux, that needs to be addressed.

Headache. While headaches are a common complaint, constant

headaches that get worse or refuse to go away with treatment may be a sign of a brain tumor or cancer of the spinal cord, pituitary gland tumors, or some forms of lymphoma. The pain can be strong enough to awaken a person from sleep, and it can be worse when lying down and when coughing or sneezing.

Back pain. Pancreatic cancer is usually fatal, since it usually is advanced by the time it's diagnosed. When the tumor gets large enough to block the pancreatic duct, it causes pain that radiates down the back. According to WebMD, while back pain is common, if it continues and isn't alleviated by anti-inflammatory medications—but is alleviated by bending over—see your doctor. Ordinary back pain won't go away simply by bending over. Back pain occurring in the mid to upper back can also be one of the first symptoms of lung cancer

Itchy spots. If you have an itchy or painful lesion on your skin—especially if it doesn't heal—get it checked. According to a recent study by the Temple University School of Medicine, itchy spots can be non-melanoma skin cancer. Of lesions diagnosed as squamous-cell skin cancer, 46.6 percent were itchy, and 42.5 percent were painful; 31.9 percent of basal-cell cancers were itchy, and 19.9 percent were painful. Potentially deadly melanoma was much less likely to be either itchy or painful.

Unexplained fever. Although fever is a common symptom of advanced cancer, a persistent low-grade fever with no obvious cause is often an early sign of blood cancers, such as leukemia or lymphoma. Fevers can either be low grade or high grade, and one that lasts longer than three days without an obvious cause should be investigated. Unexplained night sweats can also be a sign of cancer.

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