

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



AFRICAN AMERICANS AND PANCREATIC CANCER: THINGS TO KNOW

By the National Cancer Institute

BETHESDA, MD - When NFL Hall of Famer Gene Upshaw died of pancreatic cancer in 2008, it was the first time that many Americans had heard of the disease. Like many patients with this deadly cancer, the 63-year-old Upshaw died a short period after his diagnosis, shocking many football fans. The news of his death also shone a spotlight on a disease that, although rare, disproportionately affects African Americans.

Pancreatic cancer is diagnosed in African Americans more often than in other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. And African Americans are more likely than other groups to die from the disease. The reasons for these disparities are not clear. Some researchers have noted, however, that certain risk factors are more common among African Americans than among other groups. Known risk factors for pancreatic cancer include tobacco use, long-standing diabetes, obesity, inflammation of the pancreas, a family history of pancreatic cancer, and certain hereditary conditions.

Since Upshaw's death, other celebrities have been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, including actor Patrick Swayze, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and astronaut Sally Ride. The media coverage of these cases has likely raised public awareness of pancreatic cancer in the United States, where it is the fourth most deadly cancer among both men and women, although it is only the ninth most common cancer in women and the tenth most common in men.

One reason for this lethality is that early pancreatic cancer often causes no symptoms. By the time doctors detect the disease, it has usually spread beyond the pancreas. Once that happens, it is rarely curable. As a result, most patients with pancreatic cancer die within a year of diagnosis and less than 6 percent of patients survive 5 years after diagnosis.

Current treatments for patients with pancreatic cancer include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, chemoradiation therapy, and targeted therapy. Many patients receive a combination of treatments. These treatments can help patients with advanced disease feel better, but they do not cure their disease. To develop new and more effective therapies, researchers have been trying to identify the biological changes underlying pancreatic cancer, a strategy that has been effective for other cancers.

Researchers have also been investigating new ways to detect the cancer at earlier stages. The need for earlier detection is underscored by statistics: In the United States this year, it is estimated that more

than 45,000 people will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and more than 38,000 people will die from the disease.

At a minimum, it is important to understand what pancreatic cancer is and how you can find more information if you or someone you know needs it, now or in the future.

Pancreatic cancer occurs when malignant (cancer) cells develop in the tissues of the pancreas (pronounced PAN-kree-us). Located inside the abdomen, the pancreas produces juices that aid in digestion as well as several hormones, including insulin. The pancreas is surrounded by the stomach, intestines, and other organs.

There are two main types of pancreatic cancer. The most common type by far, called exocrine pancreatic cancer, starts in the ducts that carry pancreatic juices. The other type, known as endocrine pancreatic cancer or islet cell cancer, starts in the pancreatic cells that make hormones.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) offers several kinds of information resources to help you understand more about pancreatic cancer diagnosis, treatment, supportive care, and research studies. These include:

- What You Need to Know About Cancer of the Pancreas – an online publication about exocrine pancreatic cancer – at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/pancreas
- NCI's summary page about pancreatic cancer – including links for what is currently known about prevention and genetics, screening and testing, treatment, clinical trials, and related research information – at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/pancreatic

For some patients, a clinical trial may be a good treatment choice. A 10-Step Guide to Finding a Cancer Treatment Trial is available at <http://www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/search/treatment-trial-guide>, and general information about participating in clinical trials is available at <http://www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learningabout>.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.