

Symptoms to look for

Dr. James Perry, a neuro-oncologist at Toronto's Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Science Centre, explains what's going on inside the head of a brain cancer patient.

In normal people, brain cells are created at birth and don't divide. As a person grows older, the cells start to die off.

"Sometimes for some reason, there's a glitch and the cells divide. This sort of send e-mails to other cells to divide and becomes exponential.

All of sudden, you have a cluster of cells that irritate the brain, causing seizures or forming intense pressure on the skull."

He says there are two forms of tumors, one that is benign and consists of slow-growing cells, which rarely spreads to other locations. Nevertheless, this form can cause pressure on sensitive tissues, which impairs mental and physical functions that leads to death.

Malignant tumours are fast-growing cells that invade and spread beyond their original location, and uncommonly spread to other areas of the body.

"Brain cells usually grow slowly over a period of time. It takes billions of them to make a detectable tumour, so by the time somebody recognizes the symptoms we're well in the disease process."

Dr. Perry says although there is no cure, early recognition is imperative. Weakness, dizziness, personality changes, morning nausea, hearing impairment and visual disturbances are all warning detectors, symptoms you should immediately bring to your doctor's attention.



TREVOR WEEKS FOR METROTODAY

Before her diagnosis, Teney thought her slurred speech was from stress.

BTFC seeks awareness

The Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada (BTFC), a national non-profit association dedicated to brain tumour research, is gearing up for its annual Spring Sprint in Sunnybrook Park on Sunday.

Angie Smith, BTFC's development and communications officer, is ready to spread the word, support brain cancer survivors and raise research funds on Mother's Day.

In addition to the Spring Sprint, the BTFC also holds an October information day where patients can speak to doctors on a one-on-one basis.

The BTFC was co-founded in London, Ont., in 1982 by Steve Northey (whose 8-year-old daughter Kelly died of a brain tumour), neurosurgeon Dr. Rolando Del Maestro and neuroscience nurse Pam Del Maestro.

FAST FACTS/ BRAIN CANCER

■ Each year over 10,000 people in Canada will be diagnosed with a primary or metastatic brain tumour

■ There are more than 120 different types of brain tumors, making effective treatment very complicated.

For more, www.btfc.org, www.nabraintumor.org.

Source: North American Brain Tumor Coalition

Out and about with cancer

Jackie Teney hardly looks like a survivor.

With bursting blue eyes, twinkling smile and a warm laugh, it's hard to believe the self-proclaimed golf junkie, avid volley ball player and successful human resources coordinator was diagnosed with brain cancer six years ago.

Her condition is now under control, and she's excited to walk with her mother and husband Frank in the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada's (BTFC) annual Spring Sprint on Sunday in Sunnybrook Park.

Along with nine other Canadian cities, patients, survivors and pledge-raisers can walk, run or sprint or complete the distance any way they choose. In addition to raising money, the Spring Sprint is also a community-oriented event to raise awareness about brain cancer, something Teney is fighting hard to achieve.

That's because she, like many other Canadians, was hardly familiar with the symptoms of brain cancer that include blurred vision, nausea, seizures, headaches and dizziness.

Before her prognosis, it wasn't uncommon to have reoccurring headaches or experiencing distorted words while talking.

"I had these symptoms for three years, and I really thought it was stress," says the 34-year-old

Toronto native over tea at a Beaches coffee house. "Then I mentioned it to my family doctor. She suggested I get a CAT scan, and four weeks later I had my first surgery."

Teney, who is now on disability leave from her job, developed a tumour in her brain's right frontal lobe, a condition called Oligoastrocytoma. Like 10,000 other Canadians each year, she had fallen victim to brain cancer.

Her first operation occurred in June 1996 at Toronto's Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Science Centre. Further treatment wasn't necessary as her tumour was deemed low-grade, or malignant. She started work again, switched to a healthier diet and eased up on heavy duty activities.

"Four years later on my birthday, I was advised that the tumour was growing again. I had another surgery, and doctors told me it was more aggressive, so I needed some form of treatment."

She was put on chemotherapy, a pill form medication that showed



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Jackie Teney keeps herself in shape.

little, if any, results. Radiation therapy soon followed, but only worked for a short period. Then last year her tumour acted up again and she required a third surgery.

Teney is now on a new treatment, a low-dose chemotherapy pill 20 days of the month. "Every CAT scan is showing an improvement," she said.

ALL TEXT BY ZACK MEDICOFF FOR METROTODAY

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