

# A synopsis of geriatric cancer in Bangladesh

PROF DR KAZI MANZUR KADER

The care of the aged is called clinical gerontology or geriatrics. Ageing is a biological phenomenon and refers to a slow imperceptible, progressive and degenerative process advancing with chronological age leading to increased functional deterioration and vulnerability, ultimately culminating in the extinction of life.

Although there is no internationally accepted age bracket for defining the elderly population, people aged 60 years or above are considered as elderly in most gerontological literature. The elderly population in the context of Bangladesh has been defined as those who have reached 60 years of age.

Geriatric oncology is the branch of medicine that deals with the diagnosis and treatment of elderly cancer patients. Cancer is the main cause of death in the elderly population and an important cause of their suffering.

In western countries, the diagnosed malignancy in the population over 65 years of old age is approximately 60% and the age-adjusted cancer incidence rate of 2,151/100,000 of the population. The risk of cancer development in the geriatric group of patients is 11 times or more in comparison to younger people.



The incidence of cancer is also increasing with the increase of age and more than 12-23% of all cancers occur in geriatric patients and are gradually increasing day by day. But these patients receive less attention in terms of diagnosis and treatment.

The geriatric population of Bangladesh mostly suffers from cancers of the lung, oral cavity, larynx, breast, oesophagus, cervix,

stomach, urinary bladder etc. Due to the longer life expectancy of Bangladeshi people, the cancer burden is also increasing. One study of a private cancer hospital in Bangladesh shows the prevalence of geriatric cancer is about 33.77%.

Lung cancer is the most prevalent cancer in this study. Bangladesh has no definitive cancer registry for geriatric

cancer, the study compared with few articles of the South Asian subcontinent and found that many previous Indian studies also reported lung cancer is the most prevalent malignancy in the geriatric age group of population.

Oral cancer is the second prevalent cancer. Smoking, betel nut chewing, absence of a national screening programme, inadequate access to health care,

poverty, limited awareness etc. are the major contributing factors for these top two malignancies.

It is observed that lung cancer is the most prevalent malignancy among male geriatric patients followed by laryngeal and oral cavity cancer. As lung cancer and oral cavity cancer are the most frequent malignancy among males and are showing increasing trends in our country, it has become a major public health issue and control of tobacco use should be a priority. Tobacco control will not only reduce tobacco-related cancers but also many other chronic diseases. In the case of the female geriatric population, the most prevalent malignancy is breast cancer followed by cervical cancer. The incidence of breast and cervical cancer can be reduced significantly if there are screening programmes at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of Bangladesh.

Geriatric cancer patients deserve special care and attention from all the health care faculties in terms of their diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care. It is also very much important to treat the coexisting disease along with cancer as the elderly may possibly harbour many other chronic diseases to ensure better quality of life.

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## CHILD CARE

### Breastfeeding during the COVID-19 pandemic



Breastfeeding protects newborns from getting sick and also helps protect them throughout their infancy and childhood. Breastfeeding is particularly effective against infectious diseases because it strengthens the immune system by directly transferring antibodies from the mother. As with all confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases, mothers with any symptoms who are breastfeeding or practicing skin-to-skin contact should take precautions.

- Practice respiratory hygiene, including during feeding. If you have respiratory symptoms such as being short of breath, use a medical mask when near your child.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap or sanitiser before and after contact with your child.
- Routinely clean and disinfect any surfaces you touch.
- If you are severely ill with COVID-19 or suffer from other complications that prevent you from caring for your infant or continuing direct breastfeeding, express milk to safely provide breastmilk to your infant.
- If you are too unwell to breastfeed or express breastmilk, you should explore the possibility of relaxation (restarting breastfeeding after a gap), wet nursing (another woman breastfeeding or caring for your child), or using donor human milk. Which approach to use will depend on cultural context, acceptability to you, and service availability.

Breastfeeding has many important health benefits for babies and mothers, even during the pandemic. Talk with your paediatrician about how to keep your baby healthy and what resources might be available in your community to help you.

Source: World Health Organisation (WHO)

## HEALTH bulletin



### Is methylprednisolone better than dexamethasone for severe COVID-19?

Dexamethasone prevents some deaths among hypoxaemic patients with COVID-19. However, methylprednisolone achieves higher lung tissue concentrations than dexamethasone, raising questions about whether it would be more effective.

Iranian investigators randomised 86 adults with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection who were hospitalised (with oxygen saturation  $\leq 92\%$  on room air) to receive either intravenous methylprednisolone (2 mg/kg daily dose tapered after 5 days; total dosing, 10 days) or intravenous dexamethasone (6 mg daily for 10 days).

Based on the World Health Organisation's Ordinal Scale for Clinical Improvement (OSCI), patients who received methylprednisolone had significantly greater clinical improvement than patients who received dexamethasone.

Although it is not clear if these study results are due to the type of steroid and its improved lung penetration or to the higher relative dose of methylprednisolone prescribed, this approach could be considered in patients with severe COVID-19.

## Healthy diet after recovery from COVID-19

FAHMIDA HASHEM

Recovering from COVID-19 is not the only battle to win but maintaining your health post-infection is also a significant challenge. COVID-19 infection disrupts your immune system, so it is necessary to build your immunity and regain your strength.

A good diet promotes faster recovery. Adequate calories must be provided depending on the patient's nutritional status. Include calorie-dense foods in your diet but make sure they are healthy carbs and not empty ones. Opt for whole grains, potatoes, bread, pasta, rice, milk, avocados, jaggery and roasted chickpeas.

A protein-rich diet can help repair damaged body tissues, make up for muscle loss, stimulate the production of T-cells, the agents that promote healthy immune functioning and overcome post COVID-19 weakness. Protein-rich foods, like pulses, legumes, milk, yoghurt, cheese, eggs, fish, chicken, beef and organ meat could be part of the meal.

To maintain calories, the proportion of fat can be increased. Butter, ghee, medium-chain triglyceride (MCT) oil can be used through a dietitian's advice. Olive oil, rice bran oil and canola oil can also be used for cooking. Keep a jar of mixed nuts and seeds (pumpkin, sunflower, jackfruit etc.) by your side for easy snacking, they are potent sources of essential fatty acids such as omega-3 and healthy fats.

Replenishing the vitamins, minerals and antioxidants the body needs is an integral part of a recovery diet. Include 5-7 servings of fresh and seasonal fruits and veggies every day. The essential vitamins required during the period of healing are vitamins C and D. So fill the fridge with guavas, oranges, lemons and bell peppers etc. for vitamin C and get 15-20 minutes of sunlight every day along with vitamin D rich foods.

Immunonutrients are specific nutrients shown to have a considerable influence on immune function. Bangladeshi kitchens are full of potent anti-inflammatory and anti-viral ingredients such as ginger, turmeric, garlic, cumin, coriander, cinnamon, honey, all of which are usually used in different combinations and different items for overall quick recovery.

Probiotics play an important role post COVID-19 for faster recovery. Probiotics improve the gut bacteria

after the heavy antibiotics and steroids used in the treatment and also help to restore immunity.

Meal frequency and consistency is the most important part for a speedy recovery. Small frequent feeds would be better if the appetite is less, timing of fluid consumption should be in between meals and not with the meal. Taste and smell may take a while to return to normal making every bite of food utterly tasteless, but it is important to keep up the appetite with small and frequent meals.

A recovery diet would not only help you to get your strength back but also boost your immune system and keep other infections at bay until you are fully back on your feet. So choose your food wisely to ensure you are eating foods that will boost your immunity after recovery from COVID-19.

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Just as exercise improves your physical health, brain workouts strengthen your mind. It is never too late to begin exercising your most important muscle. Read on for ways to stimulate your brain.

**Laugh it off:** Stress can make your brain release a hormone called cortisol, which makes it hard to think clearly. Over time, high levels of stress can cause trouble with your learning and memory. A fun way to protect your brain is to have a good laugh which can lower cortisol levels.

**Get outside:** Nature has a calming effect and can ease stress. When you spend time outdoors, you give your brain a rest from the constant flow of data and stimulus it gets throughout the day. This lets it reboot its ability to focus, so you may feel more creative and better able to solve problems.

**Ditch your routine:** It is good for your brain to try to mix things up. A change in routine boosts your brain's ability to learn new information and hold onto it. Try out a new recipe or explore a different part of your city.

**Give it a rest:** If you do not get enough sleep, even a simple task can take more mental effort than it would otherwise. You will also find it much harder to focus, and you may notice gaps in your short-term memory. To stay fresh, aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.

**Feed your brain:** Certain foods work hard to protect your brain. These include fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish, and 'good' fats like the one in olive oil. A daily cup of tea or coffee also can help your brain wake up. Watch the processed foods which can wreak havoc on your blood sugar.

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