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Israel: World's highest rate of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

Cancer Association says overall figures in decline, cites risk, protective factors, malignancy prevention

• By JUDY SIEGEL

Although the prevalence of cancer among Israelis has declined in recent years, Israel is in first place among 20 countries in the rate of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma – cancer derived from the type of white blood cell called lymphocytes and in second place in its death rate from the malignant disease.

This was one of the revelations at a Wednesday press conference by the Israel Cancer Association and the Health Ministry to mark World Cancer Day.

The number of new cases of cancers began to decline among Jewish Israelis in 2008 and Arab Israelis in 2010. The decline in deaths from malignancies has shown up in Jews since 1995 and in Arabs from 2007. Excluding lymphomas, cancer prevalence rates and deaths here in general are below the OECD averages.

Dr. Lital Keinan-Boker, deputy head of the ministry's Center for Disease Control, said that in 2012, 28,709 Israelis were diagnosed with cancers, and 10,640 died of malignancies. The most common types that cause half of cases in men are prostate, lung, colon, bladder and non-Hodgkin's. In women, they are breast, colon, uterine and non-Hodgkin's.

In non-Hodgkins lymphoma (NHL), the lymph glands and nodes in the whole body are affected; it is most common in the glands in the neck, under the arms (axillary), chest, groin or abdomen.

The types that cause more than half of all cancer deaths are lung, colon, and pancreatic in men and breast, colon and lung in women. Among 20 leading OECD countries, Israeli men are 19th and women 15th in the prevalence of and deaths from cancers, said Keinan-Boker.

At the end of 2012, there were 13,251 Israelis living with cancer or having recovered from it. In that year, there were 1,304 new NHL patients, more men than women. A total of 545 died in 2012 from this type of cancer. Too little is known about risk factors for the disease, whose risk rises as people get older. The causes for the increase in NHL cases are also not known.

Jerusalem hematology Prof. Ora Paltiel, who has researched NHL, suggests that a reason for the rise of cases is, ironically, the better care of infants who survive mild congenital defects. In previous decades, they used to die from infections such as pneumonia. Paltiel found that infants born between 1964 and 1976 who were hospitalized for serious infections were three times more likely as adults to develop NHL. Apparently, there is a connection between the two, she said. But NHL can be treated, so death rates from the blood cancer have not increased significantly in most developed countries.

The ICA announced that it has developed a free smartphone application that makes it possible to create a picture from facial features and a first-degree relative and see similarities in the family. It also makes it

possible to assess the risk to contract breast or ovarian cancer and whether one needs to go for genetic counseling. The ICA has also produced a new booklet, "Rules for Healthy Lives," in which the risk factors for cancer are listed along with protective factors against cancer and ways of preventing malignancies. It can be obtained by calling 1-800-599995.

The ICA has also produced an information campaign for smartphones urging couples not to smoke and drink alcohol together in bars. A pilot project has also been developed to encourage people not to smoke and to quit if they already do.

In fact, guidelines listing the best ways to prevent cancer include: Do not use any tobacco product. Make sure your home and workplace are free of tobacco. Maintain a proper weight. Sit less and exercise more. Eat nutritious foods, including whole grains and pulses, vegetables and fruits and a minimum of harmful fats and sugars. Avoid processed red meats and salty foods. Limit alcohol consumption. Limit exposure to the sun and use sun screens when exposed. Avoid exposure to carcinogens at work and at home. Check whether there is harmful radon gas in your homes. Women should breastfeed their babies if possible and limit their use of hormone replacements at menopause. Get yourself and your children vaccinated against disease as recommended. Participate in early screening for colon cancer and breast cancer.