Solid Organ Transplant and Cancer Risk

Am I at risk for cancer after my solid organ transplant?

People who have had solid organ transplants (lung, heart, liver, kidney) have a higher risk of developing cancer. There are several things that may cause this increase such as:

- Immunosuppressive medicines that are used to prevent the immune system from rejecting the organ.
- Infection with viruses known to cause cancer (HPV, Epstein Barr, H. Pylori).
- Some of the things that can cause your organ to fail also increase cancer risk such as smoking and alcohol use.
- Some diseases that cause organ failure also cause a higher risk of cancer such as kidney failure and cirrhosis.

What cancers happen after a transplant?

The cancers that occur at higher rates in people who receive transplants include:

- Non-melanoma skin cancers (squamous cell and basal cell).
- Non-Hodgkin lymphoma or Post-transplant lymphoproliferative disorders (PTLD).
- Kaposi sarcoma.
- Cancers of the anogenital area (anus, vulva, penis).
- Head & neck cancers (lip, oral, and tonsil are most common).
- Kidney cancer.
- Lung cancer.
- Hodgkin lymphoma.
- Thyroid cancer.
- Stomach cancer.
- Liver cancer.
- Colorectal cancer.

How can I reduce my risk of cancer?

There are things you can do to lower your risk of cancer after a transplant. Certain immunosuppressive medications can increase the risk more than others. Higher doses of immunosuppressive medications can also increase the risk. Your transplant team balances the need to prevent organ rejection with cancer risk.

Many of these cancers have other risk factors that you can change with healthy lifestyle choices, such as:

- Practice sun safety – or sun avoidance.
- Do not use tobacco products. Talk to your provider about help quitting if you do.
- Limit your alcohol intake, if at all.
- Reduce your risk of HPV through safe sex practices.
- Keep up with your doctor visits for other health issues.

Cancer Screening

Because your risk of some cancers is higher, it is important for you to have any cancer screenings recommended by your team.
These screenings are not the same as for the general public and usually include screening tests for more cancers than the public would have. Transplant experts recommend cancer screenings depending on the organ you got and your own risk factors. Talk with your transplant team about what cancer screening tests you should have and how often.