

## Second Cancers: the risk and how to reduce it



For a number of reasons the risk of cancer increases for everyone as they get older. As a survivor of childhood cancer, or similar illness, you may have a slightly higher risk of developing a cancer in adulthood compared to people of similar age to you in the general population. There are several factors that can affect this:

1. **Radiotherapy:** receiving radiotherapy, especially at a young age and in a large dose, increases the risk of developing a second cancer, in the area of the radiation. These cancers are unlikely to develop until 10 or more years after treatment. The most common sites include bone, the brain, skin, breast and the thyroid gland.
2. **Treatment with certain chemotherapy drugs:** there is a small risk of developing leukaemia after treatment with certain drugs e.g. etoposide, cyclophosphamide & drugs like adriamycin. If leukaemia does develop this is usually within 10 years of treatment.
3. **People who have a history of cancer in their family:** some patients have inherited gene changes (mutations) that increase the chances of getting a second cancer. For example people treated with radiotherapy for the eye tumour called **retinoblastoma**, if they have the inherited form of the disease, are particularly at risk of a second cancer in the bone, called a sarcoma.

Overall inherited gene changes are quite uncommon and affect less than 10% of people diagnosed with childhood cancer. If the same or different cancers have occurred in several family generations, particularly at young ages, there may be a genetic link. A review of your family medical history will help decide if genetic counselling or testing is advisable.

Recently the Department of Health set up a National breast cancer screening programme for women treated for Hodgkin's Disease, who were treated with radiotherapy to the chest & chemotherapy, as their risk of developing breast cancer is higher than in the normal population. You will have been contacted about this, if it applies to you.

You can find out if you are in a higher risk group for developing a second cancer by discussing your treatment with the doctor or nurse in the follow up clinic. They will tell you if there are any things you should look out for between clinic check ups or anything you can do to reduce the risk.

### what can you do

- Avoid smoking
- Use extra protection in the sun – sun block and hats
- Drink alcohol in moderation
- Eat a healthy diet which includes fruit and veg
- Take regular exercise
- Report any lumps, bumps or moles especially if they are in an area that has received radiotherapy