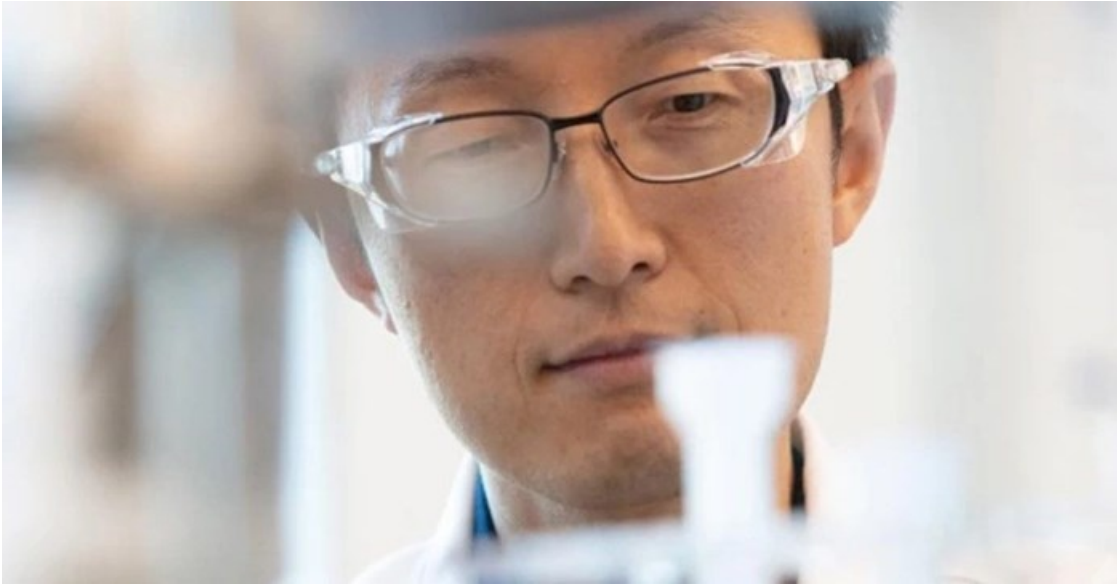


Cancers that commonly affect women and the new innovations in treatment

The word 'cancer' can inspire fear and anxiety in many people and yet, cancer therapies have evolved considerably in recent decades, substantially improving the quality of life and survival of patients with cancer.



Source: Supplied.

Cancer is the cause of 10% of deaths in South Africa. Breast-cancer awareness is particularly relevant for South Africans because it is the most common cancer among women of all races, affecting as many as 1 out of every 1,000 and being responsible for 1 out of every 12 cancer deaths.

A diagnosis of breast cancer is alarming to every woman, creating physical and emotional concerns that interfere with quality of life and employment.

Multidisciplinary health care is essential because depression is common after a breast-cancer diagnosis, with many women reporting a sense of helplessness, hopelessness and a lack of motivation to effectively cope with challenges.

Other cancers that commonly affect South African women include cervical, colorectal, uterine, skin and lung, as well as cancers of the head and neck and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. It is important for women to be empowered with knowledge regarding lowering their risk and to recognise warning signs of cancer.

To this end, biopharmaceutical firm MSD remains committed to the goals of increasing awareness regarding women's cancers. Equally important are annual health check-ups and recommended cancer screenings; these should never be disregarded.

Cancer screening – early detection

All women are at increased risk of breast cancer as they age, particularly those with a family history of breast cancer.

The most common sign is a new lump or mass in the breast tissue. Other possible signs include swelling of all or part of the breast, skin irritation or dimpling, breast and/or nipple pain, the nipple turning inward, redness, scaliness or thickening of the skin of the nipple or breast, a nipple discharge other than milk, and a lump in the underarm area.

Having one or more signs does not mean that you have breast cancer, but if the sign(s) persist for two weeks or longer, it is recommended that you consult with your doctor.



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Regular screening for breast cancer creates the opportunity for an earlier diagnosis, which improves the response to treatment and reduces the need for mastectomy.

Women should perform a self-breast examination once a month two days after their period and should have a clinical breast examination as part of their annual health check-up.

Cansa [offers](#) excellent guidance for performing self-breast examination.

An annual mammogram is recommended for women between the ages of 40 and 55 years, a mammogram every second year is usually sufficient for those older than 55 years. Genetic testing can be useful in certain cases and might help to make treatment decisions.

New innovations in cancer treatment

MSD continues to develop and provide effective new therapies for the treatment of various cancers. Immunotherapy is different to chemotherapy or radiation therapy in that it works with your immune cells to help fight the cancer. Immunotherapy for the treatment of cancers of the skin, lung, head and neck, stomach cancer, cervical cancer, certain types of breast cancer and other cancers are now available and accessible in South Africa.

The firm also aims to create awareness around the warning signs of cancer that shouldn't be ignored. The warning signs of cancers, particularly gynaecological cancers, can be similar to the symptoms of other conditions and so it is important to know what to look out for. Recognising these symptoms can increase your chances of detecting cancer early and when it is most treatable.

Abnormal symptoms that should alert you to consult with your doctor for further investigation include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- Unexplained weight loss
- Vaginal discharge that is discoloured with blood
- Constant fatigue
- Loss of appetite or feeling full all of the time

- Persistent indigestion or nausea
- Changes in bathroom and bowel habits
- Changes in the breasts
- Pain in the pelvis or abdominal area.

Best protection from getting cancer

The trend towards a Westernised lifestyle has had the unfortunate consequences of unhealthy dietary habits, lack of physical activity, obesity, and increased alcohol and tobacco use among the general population.

As with many other diseases, poor lifestyle choices are associated with higher risks of developing cancer.

Exposure to environmental chemicals can also increase the risk of cancer, as can infection with certain viruses such as HIV and human papilloma virus (HPV). By avoiding or modifying these established risk factors for cancer, 30 to 50% of cancers can be prevented. If you or someone close to you suspect that they have cancer, it is important to communicate openly with your doctor or nurse to discuss the options for diagnosing and treating the illness.

Social support from family, friends and healthcare workers is fundamental to helping women cope with their fears concerning cancer and, should it be necessary, to adhere to their treatment and medication.

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