No easy answers to questions about best cancer treatment

Just what goes into the decision-making process of surgery/radiation/chemotherapy for a cancer patient? Today's guest columnist is Arlene Lennox, Ph.D., facility head of neutron therapy at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Ill., who, in a two-part series, explains some facts on the nature of cancer, the kind of information that goes into treatment-making decisions, and the different forms of radiation. Her second column will run May 20. — Cancer Update columnist Shirley Ruedy.

By Arlene Lennox
Guest columnist

When diagnosed with cancer, patients will ask what treatment is best for their kind of cancer. In reality, the appropriate treatment may depend more on the stage of the disease, its location, and the patient's overall health status than on the particular type of cancer.

Generally, many early stage cancers are more easily treated by surgery, but for some, radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy may be the preferred treatment. The same holds true for inoperable tumors, where a form of radiation therapy, sometimes combined with chemotherapy, is the best treatment.

Once the tumor has become larger and is starting to spread (metastasize) in the region of the body close to the tumor, radiation is usually recommended. Sometimes the tumor is partially removed by surgery, then radiation given to kill the remaining cancer cells.

Sometimes radiation is administered first to reduce tumor size, with the remainder removed by surgery. If there is distant metastasis in addition to a well-defined tumor, then radiation or surgery may be used to control the tumor itself. Chemotherapy is often used as well, because unlike surgery and radiation, it is able to control the spread of cancer throughout the body's entire system.

For example, there are many different varieties of lung cancer, and the appropriate treatment depends on the pathology, the biological nature, of those particular lung cancer cells, as well as whether the tumor is a well-defined nodule, or diffused throughout a large volume of tissue.

Now you can see why it is impossible to give patients a simple answer to a question like, "What treatment is best for lung cancer?"

Next: The different types of radiation and how they're used.

Have a question on cancer? Send it to Shirley Ruedy, Cancer Update, The Gazette, P.O. Box 511, Cedar Rapids, Ia 52406.