Are cancer patients at greater risk of hearing loss?

Research shows a strong link between hearing loss and cancer treatments, especially certain chemotherapy medications and radiation.

Ototoxicity refers to drug or chemical-related damage to the inner ear, resulting in hearing and balance disturbances. Platinum-based chemotherapy medications, particularly cisplatin and carboplatin, are considered the primary ototoxicity “culprits”. This group of drugs are frequently used to treat brain, head and neck, lung, bladder and ovarian cancers in adults; and brain, bone and liver cancers in children.

Other potentially ototoxic chemotherapy drugs include bleomycin, vincristine, vinblastine, bromocriptine and methotrexate nitrogen mustard.

The debilitating effects of hearing loss are well established. In adults, it can have physical, psychological and economic impacts. In children, hearing loss can also impact speech and language development, cognitive and psychosocial development, and educational outcomes.

How to manage hearing loss

- For severe and permanent hearing loss, amplification using hearing aids or cochlear implants can be an effective option.
- To restore lost balance function, physical therapy can help retrain the brain to develop other ways to maintain balance.

Early diagnosis, intervention and treatment of hearing loss can help improve a person’s quality of life, and reduce the impact of unmanaged hearing loss.

What are the implications for you and your patient?

1. It is important for doctors and patients to understand the risks, effects and long-term implications of ototoxicity when treating cancer.
2. Prevention is crucial in avoiding permanent hearing loss during cancer treatment that involves a ototoxic agent. Frequent hearing and balance tests are recommended, particularly in high-risk patients.
3. At the conclusion of cancer treatment, an audiologist should evaluate and, if necessary, treat the patient for ototoxic after-effects.

For more information about assessing and managing hearing loss visit www.hearing.com.au

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