

Couples with colorectal cancer prompt study by S'pore team

Research to look at whether genetic or environmental factors are to blame, following discovery of such patients

Felicia Choo

Married couple Phang Yoke Fah and Lie Tjoen-Jong have shared the same meals and exercise routines over the past five decades or so, and they now have something else in common – battling cancer.

Madam Phang, 69, and Mr Lie, 73, discovered they had early stage colorectal cancer within a year of each other. Thankfully, the couple have successfully battled the disease, but that is only half the story.

They and four other married couples were found to have the affliction by the colorectal surgery unit at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) – a discovery that prompted researchers to plan studies that aim to shed more light on whether genetic or environmental factors are to blame.

The disease occurs when small growths called polyps on the walls of the colon or rectum turn cancerous, but its exact cause remains unknown.

The institute is enlisting the help of public hospitals such as Changi General Hospital and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital to recruit 200 spouses and 150 to 200 siblings of colorectal cancer patients, who have not been screened, to get checked over the next three years.

Researchers aim to learn if certain bacteria – which could be formed genetically or due to environmental factors – are linked to polyps and colorectal cancer, by comparing the absence or presence of the bacteria to the screening results.

“Some of the well-established risk factors of colorectal cancer include unhealthy lifestyles and dietary habits,” said Dr Tan Ker Kan, a consultant in the NCIS’ Division of Surgical Oncology (Colorectal Surgery) and the lead investigator in the studies.

“And with the majority of the colorectal cancer patients being in their late 60s and early 80s, it would be sensible to assume that part of their lifestyle and dietary habits would be shared by their spouses, whom they have typically been married to since they were in their 20s and 30s.”

In fact, a commonality among four of the five couples was that each husband-and-wife pair developed colorectal cancer in the same part of the body – a discovery which needs further research.

According to the Singapore Cancer Registry’s Annual Registry Report 2015, the incidence rate of new cases of colorectal cancer and the mortality rate – which have been adjusted for differences in population age distribution – have been on a



Madam Phang Yoke Fah and her husband Lie Tjoen-Jong, both colorectal cancer survivors, with Dr Tan Ker Kan (middle) of the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore. The couple said their brush with cancer underscores the importance of early detection. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

gradual decline from 2001 to 2015. The mortality rate has decreased mainly due to earlier detection and advances in treatment.

Yet, it is still the most common cancer here, with 9,807 new cases diagnosed between 2011 and 2015.

There are likely to be more couples with colorectal cancer, but efforts to identify them are hampered by people’s reluctance to go for screening, said Dr Tan.

A 2016 to 2017 study – led by Dr Tan and conducted by researchers from the National University Hospital (NUH) and the National University of Singapore – found that despite knowing the benefits of screening for colorectal cancer, only 58 per cent of the 50 spouses of colorectal cancer patients underwent screening.

The reasons cited included fear, cost, inconvenience and a feeling of invulnerability.

It is recommended that those at low risk of developing colorectal cancer should start being screened at the age of 50.

However, people at high risk – those who have a family history of

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colorectal cancer and have colorectal polyposis syndromes – should go for screening before 50.

There are two types of colorectal cancer screening – a stool blood test (as blood in the stool is a symptom of the cancer) and a colonoscopy, in which a tube is inserted through the rectum to look at the inner lining of the large intestine.

NUH treats an average of 250 to 300 new cases of colorectal cancer a year.

The team has secured funding from the Health Ministry’s National Medical Research Council for the studies, but did not reveal the cost.

Madam Phang, a retired nurse, and Mr Lie, a retired lecturer, noted that their brush with cancer has underscored the importance of early detection and treatment.

Coincidentally, their three children are all doctors who also ensure that they get checked regularly.

“The preparation was a bit troublesome but I would strongly recommend people to check (for cancer),” said Mr Lie.

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