Blocking the Deadly Spread of Pancreatic Cancer

Researchers are testing antibodies to stop the inflammation the cancer causes, and possibly prevent the original tumor from spreading to the liver.

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Jeopardy! host Alex Trebek's recent announcement of his stage 4 pancreatic cancer diagnosis has brought renewed attention to this rare, yet devastating disease — the third-leading cause of death from cancer in the United States. By the time of diagnosis, the cancer has usually spread to other parts of the body, most commonly the liver, making treatment difficult and prognosis poor. Former Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovator Gregory L. Beatty, MD, PhD, and colleagues at the Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania, recently discovered how the cancer cells are metastasizing, which may help physicians learn how to block this deadly invasion.

The researchers found that pancreatic cancer, at the earliest stages of development, induces inflammation that communicates with cells of the liver, called hepatocytes. These cells respond to the inflammatory signals by creating an environment that invites the cancer cells to "seed and grow." The researchers are testing antibodies that can stop the pancreatic inflammation to see if this limits the potential of the original tumor from spreading to the liver, a major cause of cancer death. Further research will look at preventing cancer recurrence and spread after surgery. More than 56,000 Americans are expected to be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2019. The research was published in Nature.

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