

Neuroblastoma – the basics

Disclaimer: This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

This information sheet will tell you in simple terms:

- What is a neuroblastoma?
- Why did the neuroblastoma happen?
- What problems does neuroblastoma cause?
- How did we find the neuroblastoma?
- How do we treat neuroblastoma?

What is a neuroblastoma?

A **neuroblastoma** is a type of cancer - a lump of cells (tumour) which should not be there. Neuroblastoma is a cancer that only children get. It starts from primitive (very simple) nerve cells found in areas where nerves join together. The most common areas where these are found are in the abdomen (especially the **adrenal gland**), chest and neck.

Why did the neuroblastoma happen?

In most cases, we do not know why children get a neuroblastoma.

What problems do neuroblastomas cause?

With a neuroblastoma, the problems depend on where the cancer is. Often, there is a **lump** which can be seen or felt. Some children lose their appetite and start to **lose weight**. They may complain of **pain** in their abdomen or back. In some cases, the cancer releases chemicals into the blood which cause **high blood pressure**. The neuroblastoma cancer cells may spread to other areas of the body and cause problems there.

How did we find the neuroblastoma?

You or your doctor may have noticed a lump, or been concerned about pains that do not go away. Usually a scan or an X-ray shows that there is a lump which should not be there.

How do we treat neuroblastoma?

The treatment of each person with a neuroblastoma is different. In most cases, a **paediatric oncologist** (a doctor who treats children with cancer) will develop the best treatment for your child, together with other specialists. These may be:

- a **paediatric surgeon** (a surgeon who operates on children)
- a **radiation oncologist** (a doctor who uses radiation therapy to treat cancer).

Your oncologist is: _____

Your surgeon is: _____

Your radiation oncologist is: _____

What happens in the first days?

In the first days, many **scans** will be done to find exactly **where** the cancer is, usually a CAT scan , an ultrasound, and some nuclear medicine scans (bone scan, gallium scan, MIBG scan). Some **blood tests** and a **urine test** will also be done.

A small amount of **bone marrow** (the liquid part inside bones) will be tested for neuroblastoma cells. These tests allow us to find exactly where the neuroblastoma is, and whether it has spread to other areas in the body.

Usually, a surgeon will perform an operation (a **biopsy**) to take out a small piece of the neuroblastoma so that the exact type of the cancer is known. This helps in planning the best treatment.

There are three main ways to treat neuroblastoma cancers. These are:

- use of drugs which kill cancer cells (**chemotherapy**)
- removal of some or all of the lump with an **operation**
- use of radiation to kill the cancer cells (**radiotherapy**).

Depending on the type of tumour and where it is, some or all of these ways will be used to treat the cancer. Some tumours have spread and can not be removed with an operation alone. Some tumours are not suitable for radiotherapy. Your specialists will talk to you about the best way to treat **your** child.

Any questions about this information may be directed to the Oncology Treatment Centre on 9845 2115 (8am-4pm) or Camperdown ward on 9845 1123. Further sheets are available from the Oncology staff or The Children's Hospital at Westmead's website at www.chw.edu.au. Updated **April 2003**.

the children's hospital at Westmead