WARNING SIGNS FOR CANCER IN CHILDREN

Cancer in children is fairly rare, but is often curable. It is important to make an early diagnosis. For this a high index of suspicion is necessary. The commonest types of cancer in childhood are leukaemia, lymphomas and tumours in the brain or abdomen.

Suspect cancer in a child with any of the following features:

1) **Pallor** plus **bleeding** (such as **purpura**, unexplained bruises or persistent oozing from mouth or nose)

2) **Bone pain**
   - this is not localised to specific area and often wakes the child at night
   - a child may develop a limp, or a toddler may become reluctant to bear weight or stop walking
   - always investigate backache in a child

3) **Localised lymphadenopathy**, when persistent and unexplained
   Beware of:
   - axillary/inguinal/cervical glands which are >2 cms, discreet and non-tender, and do not get smaller after 2 week’s treatment with antibiotics
   - “tuberculous” nodes not responding to treatment in 6 weeks
     Biopsy these nodes.
   - glands in supraclavicular area

4) **Unexplained neurological signs**
   These include:
   - headaches lasting longer than 2 weeks
   - early morning vomiting
   - ataxia (walks unsteadily)
   - cranial nerve palsy
5) **An unexplained mass**
   - important sites are: abdomen, testes, head, neck and limbs

   If a young child with abdominal distension is uncooperative, examine under sedation, to be sure that a mass is not present.

6) **Persistent unexplained fever, apathy or weight loss**
   First exclude:
   - urinary tract infection
   - TB
   - HIV
   Then consider malignancy

7) **Eye changes**
   - white reflex (white spot on the eye)
   - recent onset of squint
   - proptosis (forward displacement of the eyeball, bulging eyeball)
   - loss of vision

   *Refer children with these eye changes urgently to an Ophthalmologist*

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*This list was compiled by the South African Children's Cancer Study Group*