

Carter diagnosis puts spotlight on melanoma and treatments

By Erinn Hutkin | 6 p.m. Sept. 8, 2015

Former President Jimmy Carter recently spoke with reporters at a public event, where he looked happy, smiled and called what lies ahead for him “a new adventure” — radiation treatment on his brain to fight cancer.

Earlier this summer, the 90-year-old Carter, who was in the White House from 1977 to 1981, said he had cancer, but he revealed later that the melanoma had spread to his brain.

While local physicians said melanoma is more commonly known as skin cancer, it does have the rare ability to move to other areas of the body, and, as is typical of other forms of cancer, the earlier melanoma is diagnosed, the better the prognosis.

Some local physicians said that while Carter’s advanced age and the fact that the disease has advanced may work against him when fighting the disease, it appears the former president is taking advantage of the most up-to-date treatment available.

Carter’s doctors reportedly found four “very small spots” on his brain that were determined to be melanoma. He said he began having symptoms during a trip to Guyana earlier in the year, and after returning, doctors found a tumor on his liver that was diagnosed as melanoma, which has since spread to the four points on his brain.

During last month’s announcement, Carter said he was scheduled to have four treatments at three-week intervals, then undergo scans to look for signs of cancer in other areas of his body

Dr. Melanie Palm, a dermatologist and director of Solana Beach’s Art of Skin MD and an assistant volunteer clinical professor at UCSD, said that while melanoma is the No. 1 form of skin cancer, it can spread to other areas of the body, but it’s rare for the disease to move to the brain. However, she said, the most common areas for melanoma to metastasize, or move beyond the original tumor site, are the liver, brain, bones and small intestines.

“You can get skin cancer where the sun does not shine,” Dr. Palm said.

Carter has a family history of pancreatic cancer, a disease that CNN.com said took the lives of his father, brother and two sisters.

Dr. Palm said one of the strongest risk factors for melanoma is a personal or family history of the disease.

Dr. Palm said there are five stages of melanoma. Stage zero is when the melanoma is found in the first layer of skin and hasn’t penetrated any further. It’s removed via surgical incision, with a five-year survival rate of 100 percent.

Those with stage one melanoma have a spot on the skin in which the depth and thickness are less than or equal to 1 millimeter, and the five-year survival rate is 80 to 95 percent following surgical incision to remove the cancer.

Stage two comes with a melanoma whose depth is one to four millimeters in thickness and is accompanied by a five-year survival rate of 45 to 79 percent. Some patients may also be advised to seek care from an oncologist.

Those with stage three have cancer that has spread to the lymph nodes, and as a result, the five-year survival rate is 24 to 69 percent.

With stage four – which is what Dr. Palm believes Carter was diagnosed with – the five-year survival rate is 9 to 20 percent, but the prognosis can be poorer if the liver or small intestine is involved. She said Carter’s prognosis may also be poor because he has at least two organ systems involved, and because of his age.

“The younger you are, the thinner the melanoma and the earlier we catch it are key factors in overall patient survival,” she said.

Early detection is key, she noted, adding that the radiation treatment Carter is undergoing is likely aimed to help with symptoms of the cancer. While it won’t remove the tumor, it may cause slower growth or shrink it.

Meanwhile, he’s also using Keytruda, a new treatment that uses the body’s own immune system to fight cancer.

It's been reported that while less than half, or 40 percent, of patients respond to the treatment, those who respond can live for years with the cancer.

Carter told the media that while he thought he had mere weeks to live immediately after his diagnosis, he's grown more optimistic.

"I'm perfectly at ease with whatever comes," he said. "You know, I have had a wonderful life ... I have had an exciting and adventurous and gratifying existence."

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