

The Modern World – 20th Century

Killer diseases today

The facts

Today's biggest killer diseases in the western world are heart disease and cancer. Both affect mainly older people. From the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, the number of people over 65 has doubled. Due to advances in medical technology doctors can often diagnose cancer and heart disease - but not always prescribe a treatment. The lifestyle of the patient has a contributory factor in the onset of these diseases - high fat diets, smoking, excessive drinking, lack of exercise and pollution all play a part in their onset.

Heart disease is used to describe disease, which affects the body's blood circulation. Any disruption of the blood, such as a blood clot, or thrombosis, can stop blood from reaching the brain, causing a heart attack or stroke.

Heart disease, like cancer, is known as a lifestyle disease - a fatty diet, smoking, stress and over-use of alcohol can all contribute to the onset of heart disease. Heart disease is most common in the western world.

Treatment includes drugs that steady the pulse and lower blood pressure. Surgery is often performed to install pace makers to steady the heartbeat, or in heart bypasses where furred arteries are removed. Heart transplants are also an option but remain risky.

Cancer is the general term used to refer to malignant tumours on the body, caused by the uncontrolled growth of particular cells. In most developed countries, cancer is the second most common form of death, accounting for 20-25% of all deaths. The most common kind of cancer for men is lung cancer, whilst for women, it is breast cancer. Tumours of the colon and rectum are also common. Age plays an important factor in a person's chances of developing the disease.

If diagnosed early, cancerous cells can often be successfully removed by surgery. However, if the cancer has spread (secondary cancer) to other parts of the body, treatment with radiotherapy (attacking the cancers with x-rays) and chemotherapy (chemicals which attack the cancer) is required. Scanning for breast and cervical cancer in women is routinely performed in the UK.

Memory time...

- Heart disease is the main cause of death in the UK
- Cancer accounts for 20-25% of all deaths in the UK
- Both cancer and heart disease mainly affect older people.