

Urological problems in mid-life



Nowadays, Hong Kong people are more willing to look after their health as compare with those 20 years ago. This particularly become obvious after SARS and COVID 19 pandemic. At the age of 40s onwards, we are probably spending most of our time in our careers, in our families and kids. But do you ever think of your own 'urological health' when you are approaching or during your middle age? When talking about 'urology', we usually think of old gentlemen who are suffering from difficulty in passing their urine. In fact, urology is much wider than one's can imagine. There are several common urological problems for both men and women and are across different age groups.

One of the most commonly encountered urological disease after 30s is kidney stones. You may not know you have kidney stones as majority do not cause any symptoms, especially when it just starts to grow. One may only have symptoms when the stone grows bigger or when it moves from the kidney down to the ureter, where it gets stuck over there. Symptoms of having kidney stones including pain over loin area, it may cause fever if one is infected, blood in the urine, intense pain over back or lower abdomen if it is obstructing the ureter and may cause damage to the kidney function. Sometimes the symptoms may be similar to low

back pain which is originated from spine or its surrounding muscle, even urologists may not be able to differentiate clinically. An Ultrasound or a CT scan would be useful to make the diagnosis.

The treatment of kidney stones depends on the size, number and the location. Treatment options including noninvasive procedure of 'Extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy' if it is less than 2cm, invasive operations including ureteroscopic lithotripsy if it is located in ureter or percutaneous nephrolithotomy if it is a big stone. However, prevention is always better than cure! Adequate water intake approximate 2L per day, avoid salty or oxalate rich food or drink (tea, coffee, nuts, chocolate, dark green vegetable like spinach) would be preferable. The aim of the above advice is to lower the urine concentration so that it would not be able to form stone and can flush out any small stone before it grows.

Urinary frequency and urgency are another common complaint among middle-aged patients. They may experience gradually increase in urinary frequency and have the sensation to go to toilet up to every hour! They usually come to medical attention because it is so bothersome that they can't concentrate on their work or they have to wake up 2 to 3 times a night which severely affect their sleep quality. More than half of the patients will have significant improvement after changing their drinking habit, i.e. avoid excessive tea or coffee. This is because caffeinated drinks will have diuretic effect, and will also stimulate our central nervous system to produce urgency sensation.

Further investigation is suggested to rule out underlying causes, for example diabetes or nervous causes if symptoms persist. After ruling out organic causes, we can conclude the frequency symptom is due to Overactive Bladder Syndrome. It is a condition that bladder prematurely contract when it holds only small amount of urine. Therefore, patients will feel urgency in a short period of time but there is only small amount of urine passing out. The

available of new drug 'beta 3' agonist is a useful drug to control the condition with minimal side effect.

Another condition that is common to women is recurrent urinary tract infection (UTI). They will feel urgency and pain during urination, and may also develop fever and bloody urine if severe. The definition of recurrent means more than 3 attacks a year. If you are suffering from frequent attack, you should remember to save a urine sample for bacteria culture every time before you commence on antibiotic treatment. This is useful to guide urologist on whether we should proceed to have further investigation and prescribe appropriate antibiotic. The usual precipitating factor for recurrent UTI is sexual activity. Urologists will discuss with patients for prophylactic antibiotic or low dose maintenance antibiotic for those who suffered from severe symptoms or bothersome frequent attack. This is an effective method which can decrease 90% chance of having further attack. Cranberry juice also has a role in protecting women from UTI.

Out of all diseases, cancer is the most fearful one. Cancer can occur in the whole urinary tract, which include the kidneys, ureters, bladder, prostate, urethra and penis. Most of them do not have any symptoms till they develop into late stage. The most common warning symptoms including bloody urine, urinary frequency and urgency, persistent loin pain, bone pain and weight loss. And the commonest cause for these cancers, as it does in other parts of our body is Smoking! Therefore, if you are still a smoker at your middle age, please stop smoking after reading this passage!

Cancer from different urological organs will have different natural course. For example, bladder or ureteric cancer develop in a fast rate, especially for those muscle invasive type, they will easily spread to lymph node and other organs in a short period of time. On the other hand, prostate cancer is a slow growing tumour. It takes more than 10 years for an early stage

prostate cancer to spread to other region even it doesn't receive any treatment!

Nevertheless, the curative rate of early disease, no matter it is bladder, kidney or prostate cancer, is very high. Surgery is recommended in early kidney, bladder and prostate cancer. They can achieve a high curative rate with operation along without any chemotherapy or target therapy. Most of the surgeries can be done in minimal invasive manner, which means it can be finished in several small skin incisions. The recovery period can be much fastened and the hospital stay can be shortened as compared to traditional open manner.

In conclusion, the best way to keep our own urological health is to maintain a balance and healthy lifestyle, avoid smoking and have regular urological check up!