

Has cancer spread? Research identifies best way to find answers so treatment can begin

July 22 2008

For patients with head and neck cancer, accurately determining how advanced the cancer is and detecting secondary cancers usually means undergoing numerous tests – until now. New Saint Louis University research has found that the PET-CT scanner can be used as a stand-alone tool to detect secondary cancers, which occur in 5 to 10 percent of head and neck cancer patients.

The study findings, which will be presented on Tuesday, July 22 at the 7th International Conference on Head and Neck Cancer in San Francisco, Calif., will streamline care for head and neck cancer patients allowing them to begin treatment earlier, says Michael Odell, M.D., assistant professor of otolaryngology at Saint Louis University School of Medicine.

"There has been a lot of confusion about the best ways to evaluate head and neck cancer patients to see if their cancer has spread," said Odell, the study's primary author.

"Traditionally, doctors used many different tests, such as chest X-rays, CT scans, ultrasounds, bone scans and blood work. Patients went through too many unnecessary procedures because there was no real consensus on the best way to evaluate them."

According to Odell, when choosing the appropriate treatment plan for head and neck cancer patients, it is critical to accurately stage the primary cancer and detect secondary cancers. Odell's research shows

PET-CT scanning can replace all the other traditional tests.

Using the PET-CT scanner is not just a time saver, though; it also can be a life-saver.

"We all know that the time from when your doctor sees you to the time when you initiate treatment is important to outcomes," Odell explained. "So minimizing the number of tests is definitely important from an outcome standpoint."

To determine if PET-CT scans were as effective as the traditional tests, Odell and his colleagues evaluated the scans of 77 patients and found four to contain secondary cancers and one to have an additional primary cancer. The study's rate of detection – 7 percent – was inline with the results of previous studies, which range from 5 to 10 percent.

The PET-CT, which is an acronym for position emission tomography/computed tomography, combines two the benefits of both tests to offer unsurpassed diagnostic capabilities in pinpointing cancer. The PET scan is a highly sensitive scan that detects the growth of cancer cells, while the CT scan provides a detailed picture of the internal anatomy and the location of the growth.

While the current study focused exclusively on head and neck cancer patients, Odell says that it is likely that it will be applicable to other cancers.

Source: Saint Louis University

Citation: Has cancer spread? Research identifies best way to find answers so treatment can begin (2008, July 22) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-07-cancer->

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