

Spot red flags early to give children the best shot at survival



By [Katja Hamilton](#)

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If you know what to look out for and where to get help and medical care, leukaemia need no longer mean a high risk of death.



Source: [FreeFlk](#)

This is the sentiment being echoed by Leukaemia Day, which this year falls on 4 September.

Backed by Campaigning for Cancer, which has joined forces with Acute Leukaemia Advocates Network (Alan), this message of hope reminds people that as with many cancers, the last two decades or so have seen immense strides in treatment being made, and mortality rates are in steady decline.

"Leukaemia used to be a very scary word. Most people in their forties or older can remember when it was a dangerous cancer," says Lauren Pretorius, chief executive officer of Campaigning for Cancer.

"One of the reasons leukaemia was so feared is because it's the most common cancer in children (under 18s)."

"A South African paper that looked at two paediatric oncology units in the Free State and Western Cape found that 25% of

the cancers children presented with were leukaemias. A European paper noted that acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, the most common form of the disease to affect children, accounts for 28% of all newly diagnosed cases of cancer in childhood.

"But as with many other cancers, the prognosis for children with leukaemia has improved."

Improved prognosis

According to the American Cancer Society, the five-year survival rate for children with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia has greatly increased over time and is now about 90% overall.

The caveat, however, is that these stats apply to children in the developed world, Pretorius points out.

"Our reality in South Africa is different, and there are several factors that affect children's mortality rates such as whether they have access to healthcare facilities, and where they get diagnosed and referred to for treatment. Gaining physical access to clinics and hospitals can be time-consuming and costly, delaying diagnosis, while paediatric oncology units are relatively rare in the public sector.

"Other factors that affect children's prognosis include their state of health – a child that is malnourished, or struggling with another disease (TB, perhaps, or HIV) has a higher risk of death.

Know the symptoms

To ensure that all children have the best shot at recovering from leukaemia if they get diagnosed with it, it's important that adults across South Africa – parents, extended family, teachers, church youth leaders, sports coaches, any adult in contact with children and young people – have an understanding of the cancer and its symptoms.

These include painless swelling of the lymph nodes in the neck, underarm, stomach, or groin; feeling tired most of the time; repeated infections; fever and night sweats, easy bruising or bleeding and inexplicable weight loss.

"Early detection of leukaemia is vital," says Pretorius. "The sooner red flags are raised, the better parents can manage their fear, the better they can equip themselves with knowledge and the better a child's chances are of surviving."

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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