

Rhabdomyosarcoma for the Pediatric Patient

What is rhabdomyosarcoma?

Rhabdomyosarcoma is a cancer that develops from muscle cells or other soft tissue cells. It can arise in many different areas of the body. The most common sites are the head and neck, bladder, prostate gland, arms, legs, and vagina. Other less common sites are the chest, abdomen, genital area, and anal area.

Rhabdomyosarcoma accounts for more than half of all the soft tissue sarcomas diagnosed in children. Most children are diagnosed younger than 9 years of age, but rhabdomyosarcoma can occur at any age. It is slightly more common in males than in females.

What are the symptoms of rhabdomyosarcoma?

The symptoms of rhabdomyosarcoma depend upon the location of the tumor. For example if the tumor is located in the head or neck, there may be swelling around the eye or a lump in the neck. Tumors of the nose and sinus may cause a nasal voice, blockage of the airway, nosebleeds, and difficulty swallowing. If the tumor is located in the arm or leg there may be a tender or enlarged area in the muscle. Tumors in the bladder may cause bloody urine or difficulty in urination.

How is rhabdomyosarcoma diagnosed and treated?

If your child has symptoms of rhabdomyosarcoma, his or her doctor may order several diagnostic tests including a biopsy of the tumor, x-rays, a CT scan, a skeletal survey, bone scans and bone marrow aspiration and biopsy. These tests will help to determine the size and location of the tumor and whether it has spread to another part of the body. This is called staging. It is important to know the stage of the disease to plan treatment.

Rhabdomyosarcoma is a very aggressive tumor and must be treated aggressively. Three types of treatment are used, most often in combination with each other: surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. Instead, different combinations of drugs, surgery, and possibly radiation therapy can be used.