Gastric cancer may be the seventh most common cancer in Singapore, but most patients are diagnosed at an advanced stage. According to Adjunct Associate Professor Andrew Wong (Chief & Senior Consultant for Department of Surgery at Changi General Hospital), and Professor Jimmy So (Head, Division of Surgical Oncology, National University Cancer Institute, Singapore & Senior Consultant at National University Hospital) this may mean that the tumour has already spread to the surrounding lymph nodes. In this case, surgery can still remove the tumour and the affected lymph nodes, but because of the advanced stage, the patient will require chemotherapy after surgery. Sometimes the cancer may be so advanced that it has already spread to other organs in the body like the liver or the peritoneal cavity. In such cases, surgery can no longer remove all the cancer cells in the body and chemotherapy is then necessary to control the cancer and its symptoms. In either situation, prognosis is poor when gastric cancer is diagnosed at an advanced stage. That is why, although it is the seventh most common cancer, gastric cancer is the fourth highest cause of cancer deaths in Singapore.

The only way to improve this situation is for gastric cancer to be detected at an early stage. However, early stage gastric cancer can have very few symptoms. These symptoms may be subtle and easily confused with common daily gastrointestinal disorders. Symptoms such as upper abdominal discomfort, bloating, or pain that does not seem to improve with a short course of medication should warrant further investigation, including endoscopy of the stomach — a simple procedure which can be performed under sedation without any discomfort.

When gastric cancer is detected at an early stage, treatment is less invasive and is more effective. The cancer can then be removed using endoscopy without the need to remove the stomach. In situations when the cancer is detected early but is not suitable for endoscopic removal, minimally invasive surgery techniques can be performed to remove part of the stomach afflicted by the cancer. The smaller wounds result in less wound pain after surgery with faster recovery.

Sign up for the Gastric Cancer forum on Sep 14 at Toa Payoh Hub Auditorium to learn from specialists about gastric cancer, its signs and symptoms, treatment options and more. To register, visit: http://bit.ly/gcam2019, call 64215860 or email communityhealth@singaporecancersociety.org.sg.