Andy Williams' Bladder Cancer: No Death Sentence

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By Brenda Sokolowski

Singer Andy Williams, 83, stunned his fans on Saturday by announcing that he has bladder cancer. The beloved star told an audience at his Moon River Theater in Branson, Mo., about his grim diagnosis, but he sounded hopeful about his condition and vowed to return to performing in 2012.

Cancer experts tell Newsmax Health that Williams likely faces a serious surgical procedure in which his tumor — and perhaps his bladder — will be removed. Afterward, however, his odds of survival are good.

The legendary crooner, probably best known for his rendition of “Moon River,” also hosted “The Andy Williams Show” on television from 1962 to 1971 and performed in annual Christmas specials. His “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” has been a Christmas staple since 1963.

“In most cases of bladder cancer, the tumor is worrisome enough that a section of the bladder is excised or the whole bladder removed,” says Morton Levitt, M.D., a pathologist and medical professor at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine in Boca Raton.

Bladder-removal surgery, or cystectomy, can be traumatic, with some patients having to wear a bag that collects urine.

However, the typical prognosis for patients with bladder cancer is quite good, Dr. Levitt told Newsmax Health. Three-quarters of patients are diagnosed when the cancer is in its early stages. And for them, there is at least a five-year, disease-free survival rate of about 75 percent.

After surgery, combinations of therapies — chemotherapy and/or radiation — are typically begun to kill any cancer cells that may remain and to lower the risk the cancer will return.

Newer treatments are being tested in clinical trials, according to the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institutes of Health. These include chemoprevention, the use of vitamins or other substances to reduce the likelihood of a recurrence, and photodynamic therapies, which use laser-activated drugs to target cancer cells in the body.

Some have claimed alternative methods such as acupuncture, massage, and relaxation techniques have help ease pain associated with the disease and its treatment.
There are an estimated 70,000 new cases of bladder cancer diagnosed each year, according to the NCI.

So who’s most at risk for this type of cancer? Mostly older adults, as it turns out. Some 80 percent of bladder cancer patients are diagnosed between the ages of 50 and 80, Dr. Levitt says.

Smokers are twice as likely as nonsmokers to get bladder cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. Carcinogens from tobacco can be absorbed into the bloodstream, get filtered by the kidneys and pool in the bladder, where they can damage cells and lead to cancer.

Chronic use of some analgesics and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs has also been associated with an increased risk of bladder cancer, according to Dr. Levitt.

Also with increased odds for bladder cancer are men, whites, those with a family history of the disease, previous chemo treatment, or exposure to certain chemicals.

Still, when caught early, it’s a highly treatable type of cancer, Dr. Levitt says.

Williams was upbeat as he went public with his condition, saying bladder cancer "is no longer a death sentence. People with cancer are getting through this thing. They're kicking it, and they're winning more and more every year. And I'm going to be one of them."