

November Is Lung Cancer Awareness Month

Early Detection of Lung Cancer Saves Lives



Lung cancer — the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells in the lungs, causing tumors to form — is the leading cause of cancer death for both men and women. Each year, more Americans die from lung cancer than from breast, prostate, and colorectal cancers combined. In 2005, there was about 172,570 new cases of lung cancer in the U.S.: 93,010 among men, and 79,560 among women, according to the American Cancer Society. About six out of 10 people with lung cancer die within one year of finding out they have it, and between seven and eight will die within two years, reports the American Cancer Society.

WHAT CAUSES LUNG CANCER?

According to lungcancer.org, an online resource sponsored by CancerCare for lung cancer patients and their families, more than 87 percent of lung cancers in the United States are smoking-related. Men who smoke increase their risk of death from lung cancer by more than 22 times, and women by more than 12 times. However, there are factors other than smoking that can increase an individual’s risk for developing the disease. These factors include: exposure to other carcinogens such as asbestos and radon gas; certain industrial substances such as arsenic, some organic chemicals; radiation from occupational, medical and environmental sources; air pollution; and tuberculosis.

Sometimes, the cause is not known or the onset of lung cancer is a result of past actions. Former smokers, like the late Peter Jennings (anchor and senior editor of ABC’s “World News Tonight”) who recently died of lung cancer, are at risk as well. Quitting smoking does reduce an individual’s risk significantly — although former smokers remain at greater risk for lung cancer than people who never smoked.

TYPES OF LUNG CANCER

There are two main types of lung cancer: non-small cell (87 percent of all cases), and small cell (13 percent of all cases). The names refer to the kinds of cells that make up the tumor rather than the size of the tumor. Small cell lung cancer often starts in the bronchi, air tubes in the center of the chest. Although the cancer cells are small, they can multiply quickly and form large tumors that can spread widely throughout the body. This is important because it means that treatment must include drugs to kill the widespread disease. This kind of cancer is almost always caused by smoking. It is very rare for someone who has never smoked to have small cell lung cancer.

Non-small cell lung cancer is classified into three subtypes, and the cells in these sub-types differ in size, shape and chemical make-up. Squamous cell carcinoma tends to be found centrally, near a bronchus (a large air passage in the lungs). It can spread rapidly if not treated early. Adenocarcinoma is the most common form of lung cancer, is usually found in the outer region of the lung, is more likely than other types to be contained in one area of the body, and is the most frequent type of lung cancer seen in nonsmokers. Large-cell undifferentiated carcinoma can appear in any part of the lung and tends to grow quickly and spread at an earlier stage than other forms of non-small cell lung cancer, which can make it hard to treat.

Lung cancer almost always begins in one lung and, if left untreated, can spread to lymph nodes or other tissues in the chest (including the other lung). It can also metastasize (or spread) throughout the body, to the bones, brain, liver, or other organs.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The signs and symptoms of lung cancer may take years to appear, are often confused with symptoms of less serious conditions, or may not appear until the disease has reached an advanced stage. Here’s what to look for:

- Smoker’s cough that persists or becomes intense
 - Persistent chest, shoulder, or back pain unrelated to pain from coughing
 - Recurrent pneumonia or bronchitis
 - Loss of appetite
 - Bone fractures not related to accidental injury
 - Neck and facial swelling
 - Blood in sputum (coughed-up phlegm from the lungs), an increased amount of sputum, or a change in its color
- Non-smoker’s cough that persists for more than two weeks
 - Wheezing
 - Fatigue
 - Headache, bone pain, aching joints
 - Neurological symptoms (i.e., unsteady gait and/or episodic memory loss)
 - Unexplained weight loss

There also may be signs and symptoms caused by the spread of lung cancer to other parts of the body. Depending on which organs are affected, these can include: headaches, general weakness, pain, bone fractures, bleeding, or blood clots. Anyone experiencing any of these signs or symptoms should consult a physician immediately.

EARLY DETECTION

Early detection of lung cancer is critical to improving the chances of survival. The five-year survival rate for those whose lung cancer is found when it is localized (before it has spread to other organs) is nearly 50 percent, according to lungcancer.org. However, only 15 percent of lung cancer cases are found at the localized stage. Research indicates that when lung cancer is diagnosed/detected in an early-stage and surgery is possible, the five-year survival rates can reach 85 percent, reports lungcancer.org. Survival rates decline dramatically after the cancer has spread to other organs. Testing people that are known to be at high risk for developing lung cancer can help to find tumors that are small and more easily treated. Those at high risk include men and women: 60 years of age who currently smoke or have a history of smoking; with previous lung tumors; or with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

CHOOSING A DOCTOR AND TREATMENT CENTER

Since lung cancer is a complex disease, it often requires more than one kind of treatment, and more than one kind of doctor. A lung cancer patient may be cared for by a team of health care experts specializing in oncology, lung and chest health, and other related fields. Treatment options include surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, either alone or in combination, depending on the type and stage of the cancer.

According to the American Cancer Society, the most important factors to take into account when deciding on treatment include the stage and type of cancer, your overall health, the likely side effects of the treatment, and the chance of curing the cancer or extending your life. They suggest to get a second opinion which can provide more information and help you feel good about the treatment plan you choose.

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