

Lung Cancer: More Serious Than You Might Think

Every five minutes, a woman in the U.S. is told she has lung cancer.

In fact, lung cancer is the number one cancer killer of women. More people die every year of lung cancer than of breast, colon, and prostate cancers combined.

“The survival rates haven’t changed significantly in the past 25 years,” says Alicia McKelvey, MD, a Main Line Health thoracic surgeon. “By the time patients have symptoms, they are typically at an advanced stage of the cancer.” As a result, all those annually diagnosed with lung cancer have just a 16 percent chance of being alive in five years.

Despite these sobering stats, lung cancer gets little attention. Its strong association with smoking—the main cause—can make it not as sympathetic.

“People sometimes think that if you smoked, you deserve it,” Dr. McKelvey says. But the truth is that anyone, even nonsmokers, can get lung cancer. Ten percent of lung cancer cases are among people who have never smoked. The leading nonsmoking cause is from radon, a toxic, colorless gas found in soil and rock. Other causes may include air pollution, genetics, and secondhand smoke.

Knowing the Signs

It can be difficult to tell if you have lung cancer, as it often has no symptoms in the early stages. However, if you experience any of the following symptoms, contact your doctor:

- A persistent cough
- Coughing up blood

- Unexplained weight loss
- Recurrent pneumonia
- New bone pain
- Increasing fatigue
- Seizures or headache

Should You Be Screened?

Late last year, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommended that individuals with certain risk factors be screened annually for lung cancer after a study showed that low-dose CT scans can reduce mortality by 20 percent in high-risk patients. Those include people ages 55 to 80 with a history of heavy smoking who are current smokers or have quit in the past 15 years. Heavy smoking is defined as 30 “pack years,” with a pack year being an average of one pack a day for a year. This screening is available at Main Line Health facilities. To find a location near you, call **484.565.LUNG (5864)**.

Prevention Is Key

It’s never too late to stop smoking—quitting today can help as early as tomorrow. “Within a couple of weeks, the risk of irritant asthma goes down, and you’ll immediately improve your quality of life,” says pulmonologist Gregory Williams, MD.

Main Line Health offers smoking-cessation classes with high success rates. “If you try to quit cold turkey, your rate of quitting smoking is very low,” says Michael Walker, MD, chief of thoracic surgery at Main Line Health. “The best overall rate of quitting is with a program.” To learn more about classes, turn to page 10 in this issue. ●

CHANGING MINDS ABOUT LUNG DISEASE

The American Lung Association has started a program called Lung Force aimed at helping women learn more about lung cancer. The goal is to change people’s minds about what it means to have the disease so that everyone understands their risks. Lung Force also supports research that will lead to earlier detection and more personalized treatments. Learn more at www.lungforce.org.

