Lung Cancer: Risk Factors and Screening

According to the American Cancer Society's (ACS) 2012 cancer statistics, lung cancer has become the most deadly form of cancer - causing as many deaths as the next four leading causes of cancer deaths combined.

Although some might be at risk due to family history, most who are diagnosed with lung cancer can attribute it to unhealthy habits such as smoking. According to the ACS, almost 176,000 of the estimated 585,720 cancer deaths in 2014 will be caused by tobacco use.

Knowledge is power, especially in terms of health, so here is some important information about risk factors, symptoms and the screening tests which are available.

Risk Factors

There are several risk factors which can be controlled and avoided so as to decrease your chances of developing lung cancer, including:

- Smoking
- Exposure to secondhand smoke
- Exposure to radon gas
- Exposure to asbestos/chemicals
- Radiation therapies (often for other cancers) to the chest
- Diet

The number one way to help prevent the development of lung cancer is to never start or quit smoking, in addition to avoiding secondhand smoke. While most risk factors are things a person can proactively avoid, a family history of lung cancer has shown to give people an increased risk of the disease.

Symptoms

If you have a history of smoking, have held a job in a workplace filled with dangerous chemicals and gases, or have a family history of lung cancer, there are certain symptoms you should be aware of and watching for, including:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Coughing up blood
- Wheezing
- Hoarseness in one's voice
- Persistent cough
- Loss of appetite
- Headaches
- Coughing up phlegm or mucus
- Extreme weight loss without cause
- Bone pain/aches
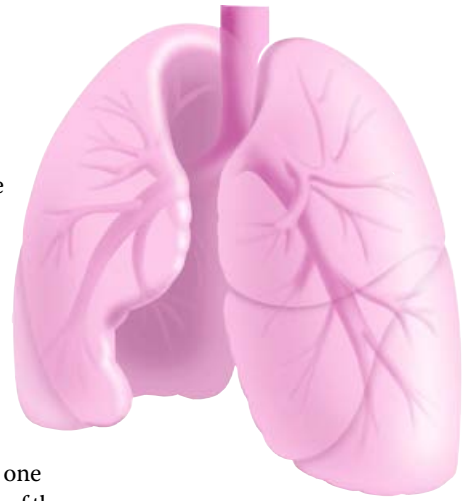
If you experience one or more of these symptoms, it's advised that you consult with your care provider, who may recommend some tests and screenings. Just as importantly, there are many instances where one may not experience any of these symptoms.

For those whose do not show or experience symptoms, the cancer may be noticed during a chest X-ray, CT scan, or some other check, such as one for heart disease. Most are diagnosed with lung cancer when the tumors have grown and are beginning to cause problems for parts of their body near their lungs.

Screening

In addition to examining someone physically, there are numerous diagnostic tests to check a person for lung cancer. These include:

- Biopsy
- Sputum cytology
- Needle aspiration/core biopsy
- Thoracotomy
- Mediastinoscopy
- CT scan
- PET scan
- Bone scan
- Molecular testing of the tumor
- Bronchoscopy
- Thoracentesis
- Thoracoscopy
- Imaging tests
- Bone marrow aspiration and biopsy
- MRI scan

The process of screening can help doctors and patients identify the stage and severity of their lung cancer. While these methods are generally very effective, the CDC cautions that screenings carry with them three potential risks that are worth keeping in mind. These are:

- Risk of a false-positive result, which can lead to follow-up tests and surgeries that are not needed and may have more risks
- Risk of overdiagnosis, which can also lead to unnecessary treatment
- Radiation from repeated tests, which can cause cancer in otherwise healthy people

Being aware of risk factors and possible symptoms of lung cancer can help you avoid developing lung cancer. If you feel you are at risk, talk to your care provider about these screening options and the best plan of care moving forward. ■

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