

LUNG CANCER

The breath of life is something we take for granted every single day of our lives. With little conscious effort or thought, we draw the very essential element of life into our bodies. Indeed, we even refer to acts easy to perform as being “as natural as breathing.” Yet for almost 170,000 Americans, breathing has lost its natural simplicity. These are the unfortunate ones who have developed lung cancer.

This year, lung cancer will account for 13% of all cancers diagnosed. More notably is that 28%, or over 157,000, will die of this insidious disease. The sad part is that many of these cases could have been prevented by a change in lifestyle. This change was merely a match stroke away.

Among the known risk factors contributing to lung cancer, tobacco smoking is the leading cause. Anti-smoking campaigns have created a greater awareness of the risk, resulting in a significant decline in lung cancer rates among men. In 1984, 86.5 men out of 100,000 were diagnosed. By 1997, this rate had declined to 69.1.

Among women, however, the past decade revealed an increasing predilection to smoking. Hence, lung cancer rates among women have climbed to 43.1 per 100,000, and have surpassed even the number of breast cancer mortalities. Current studies show that women are more reluctant to extinguish their addiction than their male counterparts.

In addition to tobacco, there are other risk factors that contribute to lung cancer. They include: exposure to arsenic, nickel, chromium compounds and chloromethyl ether, some organic chemicals, radon, asbestos, occupational exposure to radiation, air pollution, tuberculosis, and second-hand smoke. Smokers who are exposed to these risks further increase their potential to develop lung cancer.

The symptom often first noted is a smoker's cough that has worsened. This cough could be attributed to a tumor that is irritating the lining of the airways, or is blocking the passage of air.

Other symptoms often associated with lung cancer are: constant chest pain; shortness of breath; wheezing; repeated bouts of pneumonia or bronchitis; coughing up blood; swelling of the neck and face (tumor pressing on large blood vessels); pain or weakness in the shoulder, arm or hand (tumor pressing on nerves near the lung); and general cancer symptoms of fatigue, loss of appetite, and weight loss. While these symptoms do not automatically indicate lung cancer, anyone experiencing these signs should contact their physician.

As with all cancers, early detection is essential to survival. Unfortunately, lung cancer is usually not diagnosed until its advanced stages. Only about 15% of lung cancers are diagnosed in an early stage. Surprisingly, those who stop smoking when pre-cancerous stages are found will be able to reverse the damage, with the lung tissue returning to normal.

Most often, it is during a physical exam that enlarged lymph nodes in the neck, a mass in the lung, and/or an enlarged liver or mass in the abdomen are found. At this point, the patient is sent for a biopsy.

There are two primary types of lung cancer: nonsmall cell, which accounts for 75% of all lung cancers; and small cell, which is sometimes called “oat cell” cancer because the cells look like oats under the microscope. This type of cancer is aggressive and spreads rapidly.

Treatment of lung cancer is determined by its stage and type. Early stages of nonsmall cell may only require surgery as long as the tumor is localized and has not spread. Surgery can range from removal of a small part to removal of the entire lung.

If surgery is not feasible because of health and spread of cancer, radiation therapy can be used as the primary treatment. Some patients may receive a combination of treatments, including surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.

For small cell lung cancer, chemotherapy is the primary treatment to kill tumors that are too small to detect. Radiation is often used in conjunction to treat the primary chest tumor(s). Surgery for small cell patients has shown only minimal benefits.

Survival rates for lung cancer are grim. The one-year survival rate is 41%. By the fifth year, survival of all stages combined drops to 14%. Late stages are at less than 5%.