



CANCERcare®

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# fact sheet

## LUNG CANCER: UNDERSTANDING RISK FACTORS AND SCREENING

**Lung cancer is the second most common type of cancer in the United States after skin cancers. Lung cancer happens when some of the cells in the lungs change and start to grow out of control. This can form a tumor or mass. Regular lung cancer screening can help find these tumors when they are easier to treat. This is especially true if you are higher risk.**

### ATTITUDES ABOUT LUNG CANCER

There is sometimes a stigma around lung cancer. “Stigma” refers to judgment or negative feelings that come with a particular behavior. Because lung cancer has been linked to smoking, people sometimes believe it is the person’s fault for getting it. This is simply not true. This attitude may make people feel ashamed and may cause them to avoid screening.

In reality, even people that have never smoked may be at risk of lung cancer. There are other risk factors. Anyone who has concerns about developing lung cancer should speak with their doctor.

Educating yourself about cancer and screening can help you feel more comfortable moving forward. It is important to understand a diagnosis is not anyone’s fault. It is better to put your own health first and not allow any fears to take over.

### SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF LUNG CANCER:

Knowing the signs and symptoms of lung cancer can help with early diagnosis. It is still possible for signs to develop in the earliest stages. While these symptoms can occur for other reasons besides cancer, getting screened is the best way to understand your health. These signs include:

- Coughing that doesn’t go away
- Coughing up blood
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing



- Voice changes (weak, scratchy or hoarse voice)
- Feeling tired all the time
- Unexplained weight loss
- Frequent pneumonia or bronchitis

If you notice any of these symptoms, see your doctor right away. If cancer is found, you can start treatment sooner. Getting screened can also help find cancer before any symptoms start. Finding the cancer earlier can lead to better outcomes.

### RISKS OF LUNG CANCER

Smoking is the most common cause of lung cancer, but it is not the only one. Other causes of lung cancer include:

- **Radon exposure.** Radon may be present in some homes based on local rock and soil types or certain building materials. Those who work underground may also be at higher risk.
- **Hazardous chemicals.** Working with asbestos, uranium, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, nickel and some types of petroleum may increase risk.
- **Particle pollution** (pollution in the air we breathe). Frequent or long-term exposure to smoke, small dust particles and exhaust from cars, buses and other vehicles can increase risk.

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There are also factors in your personal health history that may suggest higher risk of lung cancer. These include:

- **Genetics.** If you have a family history of lung cancer, ask your doctor for more information. You may be eligible for biomarker testing.
- **Previous radiation.** Radiation to the chest due to certain cancer treatments.

## HOW TO LOWER YOUR RISK

- **Quit smoking.** If you smoke, quitting is the best way to reduce your risk of lung cancer. Quitting is hard, but there are ways to help you. Talk to your doctor about programs to stop smoking, also called smoking cessation programs.
- **Avoid spending time around others who are smoking** (also called secondhand smoke).
- **Protect yourself at home and work.** The Environmental Protection Agency recommends that you get your home tested for radon. If you work with or around hazardous chemicals, ask about what you can do to avoid greater risk.

## UNDERSTANDING SCREENING GUIDELINES:

**For those at higher risk with a history of smoking:** Low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) every year for smokers and former smokers who are at high risk. This includes people that are between the ages of 50 to 80. Those who have a 20 pack-year smoking history and currently smoke are also at higher risk. Even if you have quit within the past 15 years, you should also be screened.

## CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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A “pack-year” is a term doctors often use. A pack-year is counted as the same as smoking a pack of cigarettes per day for a year. If you have smoked a pack a day for the last 20 years, this equals 20 pack-years. If you smoke two packs a day for 10 years, this is also the same as 20 pack-years, because it is the same number of cigarettes. If you have 20 pack-years or more, screening is usually recommended. Your doctor can help you calculate this number for you.

**For those at higher risk due to family history or exposure to chemicals or pollution:** Ask your doctor about your own risk and whether you may need to be screened.

**For all others:** Even if you have never smoked, you may still wish to talk to your doctor about lung cancer screening. Your doctor can help you decide if and when screening is right for you.

For more information about lung cancer and screening, you can reach out to LUNgevity at 844-360-5864 or [LUNgevity.org](http://LUNgevity.org).

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