

What every woman should know about lung cancer

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When most women consider deadly cancers, breast cancer is likely the first to come to mind. However, few are aware that lung cancer is actually the deadliest cancer in the United States among women and men. It claims more lives annually than breast, colon, and prostate cancers combined. While that's a grim statistic, there is hope.

Improvements in prevention, early detection, and advanced treatment are altering the meaning of a lung cancer diagnosis today. The American Lung Association's (ALA) 2024 State of Lung Cancer Report found that lung cancer survival rates have improved 26% in just five years and the national five-year survival rate is now at 28%.

That improvement comes as a result of advancements in early detection through CT scan imaging for lung cancer screening, the development of targeted therapies for specific genetic mutations, and the widespread use of immunotherapy and modern radiation techniques. Together they are altering the meaning of a lung cancer diagnosis today.

Pay attention to your health

Early lung cancer detection greatly enhances survival rates. However, it can be difficult to diagnose early-stage lung cancer before symptoms appear. This again highlights the importance of performing regular screening for detection of lung cancer which is often curable in its early stages. In further efforts to increase early detection, women need to be aware of lung-cancer warning signs such as:

- A persistent cough that last more than 3 weeks or worsens over time
- Chest or back pain that worsens with deep breathing or coughing
- Coughing up blood
- Shortness of breath even during light activity
- Wheezing or a high-pitched whistling sound when breathing
- Hoarseness or a change in voice such as a raspy or hoarse tone
- Unexplained weight loss or fatigue
- Recurrent bronchitis or pneumonia
- Swelling of the neck or face

These symptoms can easily be ignored or blamed on less serious medical issues, which can lead to delays in diagnosis. Women need to understand that the persistence of these symptoms definitely calls for a doctor's appointment. Follow your gut. If something feels off, trust your instincts and ask for testing.

Knowing the risks

Smoking significantly increases the risk of developing lung cancer and is linked to about 80 to 90% of lung cancer deaths. Quitting smoking significantly lowers that risk and those with a history of heavy smoking should talk to their doctor about getting screened. Even non-smokers can develop lung cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, about 10 to 20% of lung cancer cases in the United States occur in people who have never smoked.

Risk factors for lung cancer also include:

- Exposure to secondhand smoke
- Radon gas exposure
- Family history of lung cancer
- Previous radiation treatment to the chest at a young age
- Workplace exposure to toxins such as asbestos or arsenic
- Exposure to fine particle matter and air pollution
- Hormonal and genetic factors may also play a role

The good news is that many of these risk factors can be reduced or eliminated with knowledge and action.

Preventing lung cancer

The best preventive action is to never start smoking or quit as quickly as possible. Even after many years of smoking, quitting leads to significant reductions in risk over time. Smoking cessation programs, counseling, and nicotine replacement therapy all help.

Other steps to reduce risk include:

- Testing your home for radon with do-it-yourself kits
- Avoiding secondhand smoke with smoke-free homes, vehicles, and workplaces
- Using protective equipment at work if you work around chemicals or dust
- Keeping lungs strong with regular exercise, a balanced diet, and managing chronic respiratory conditions like COPD or asthma
- Reducing exposure to air pollution from heavy traffic areas
- Using indoor air filtration if needed

Lung cancer screening saves lives

One of the greatest advances in treatment for lung cancer care is low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) screening. Because lung cancer can progress unnoticed, LDCT allows doctors to detect disease early, when it's most curable.

The U. S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends annual lung cancer screening with LDCT in adults 50 to 80 years old who are:

- Current smokers with a history of 20 pack-years or more (i.e., one pack a day for 20 years or two packs a day for 10 years, etc.)
- Former 20-pack year smokers who quit within the past 15 years

If you meet those criteria, LDCT screening is one of the most important preventive steps you can take.

Why screening matters

A low-dose CT uses far less radiation than with standard CT scans and finds abnormalities in the lung, including nodules that are too small to be detected on a chest x-ray. Early detection of lung cancer dramatically increases survival rates. Research shows low-dose CT screening can reduce lung cancer deaths by up to 20% in high-risk individuals.

Participating sites such as HOA's Lungs for Life Program in East Syracuse and Camillus, offer low-dose CT scans as part of a coordinated care program. Yearly screening is reimbursed by the majority of insurance companies including Medicare for people who qualify. For patients without insurance or those choosing to pay directly screenings generally cost around \$250, which may vary geographically.

The HOA "Lungs for Life" program

The Lungs for Life program offered by Hematology-Oncology Associates of Central New York (HOA) makes lung screening convenient and easy.

It offers:

- Annual LDCT scans for eligible individuals
- Accredited imaging in East Syracuse and Camillus
- Help with insurance coordination and low-cost self-pay options
- Navigation to guide patients through scheduling, results and follow-up
- Ongoing monitoring for those with identified benign lung nodules
- Free community screening events during Lung Cancer Awareness Month*

Treatment advances provide hope

Early detection and intervention of lung cancer are often curative. Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) occurs in approximately 85% of cases, and small cell lung cancer (SCLC) is less common but more aggressive.

Treatment depends on the lung cancer's stage, type, and genetic makeup. At HOA, care is personalized and multidisciplinary, combining:

- Surgery for early-stage disease
- Radiation therapy, including CyberKnife®, a highly precise, noninvasive treatment available exclusively at HOA in Central New York
- Targeted therapies that block specific cancer-causing mutations
- Immunotherapies that use the body's immune system to fight the cancer
- Chemotherapy often used strategically in combination with other treatments

Opportunities for clinical trials are also important because they provide access to next-generation treatments before they are available to the general population. Supportive services such as nutrition counseling, rehabilitation, and emotional support also are integral to every care plan.

Lung cancer is no longer a hopeless diagnosis. With awareness, early discovery, and modern treatments, more and more women are living and even thriving beyond treatment.

This Lung Cancer Awareness Month, take charge of your lung health. Talk with your provider, learn about your risks, and schedule your screening. Awareness may just save your life. *SWM*

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**The 2025 Free Lung Cancer Screening offered by HOA in partnership with CRA Imaging follows USPSTF guidelines and is scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 8, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at HOA's East Syracuse and Camillus offices. Appointments are required by calling 315.472.7405, extension 1301.*