

# Lung Cancer

FACT SHEET prepared by The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

**Cancers occur when the cells that make up our bodies grow in an abnormal and out-of-control way forming lumps or tumours. Cancers that first develop from cells in the lungs are unfortunately very common in New Zealand. These are known as primary lung cancers. The lungs may also be affected by secondary cancers that start somewhere else in the body (bowel or breast for instance) and spread to the lungs.**

## Lung Cancer in New Zealand

Over 1500 men and women are diagnosed with lung cancer each year in New Zealand. Lung cancer is the most common cause of death from cancer in New Zealand men, and the second most common for women.

In the past more men than women have got lung cancer, but lung cancer rates among women are increasing and are expected to be as high as men in the near future. This is because of the increased smoking rates among women. There is also some evidence that women may be particularly sensitive to the carcinogenic effects of cigarette smoke.

## What causes lung cancer?

Up to 90 percent of lung cancer is caused by cigarette smoking. Environmental tobacco smoke (passive or second-hand smoke) can bring about disease in children and non-smokers. It is not known why some smokers develop lung cancer while others do not.

Asbestos exposure is another cause of lung cancer and greatly adds to the risk in people who also smoke. Even though asbestos is not used any more, cases of asbestos-related lung cancer will continue to occur because many people were exposed to raw asbestos and asbestos products imported between 1962 and 1996. It may take 20 years or more for cancer to develop following exposure.

Exposure to marijuana smoke, and a number of other chemicals can also cause lung cancer.

## What are the symptoms of lung cancer?

Some people have no symptoms, but learn they have lung cancer when it shows on a routine chest x-ray. Other people may develop symptoms or get a chest infection that doesn't get better quickly.

The most common symptoms of lung cancer are a persistent cough or change in a long standing cough, repeated bouts of pneumonia or bronchitis, shortness of breath, noisy breathing, pain in the chest area and blood-stained sputum. All of these symptoms can be caused by other disorders but they should be checked by a doctor.

In the later stages of lung cancer people may experience fatigue, loss of weight, extreme shortness of breath, hoarseness, difficulty in swallowing, facial swelling and back pain. There may also be symptoms that seem unrelated to the lungs. These may be caused by the spread of a lung cancer to other parts of the body.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

Your doctor may order a number of tests to make a diagnosis of lung cancer:

- Chest X-ray - Abnormal spots in the lungs can be detected
- CT Scan - Accurately assesses the tumour and can determine if other organs or lymph nodes are affected
- Sputum test - Checks for cancer cells in the phlegm
- Bronchoscopy - A flexible tube is inserted down the windpipe to look into the airways. Collections of secretions and biopsies are often taken at the same time to look for cancer cells.

### **What are the treatments for lung cancer?**

You will need to be assessed by your doctor to determine the type of treatment that is best for you. Some of the options you may be offered are:

**Surgery** Whether surgery can be done depends on the size, location and type of the tumour  
**Radiotherapy** Sometimes referred to as radiation therapy. This is a form of high-energy X-ray that kills cancer cells. It is often used in combination with surgery and chemotherapy.

**Chemotherapy** The use of drugs effective against cancer cells. Chemotherapy may be injected directly into a vein or taken by pill.

Unfortunately, many cases of lung cancer cannot be cured. In these cases the aim of treatment is to keep you as well and symptom-free as possible. Most people will benefit from treatment, even if there is no cure.

### **Can lung cancer be prevented?**

The best cure for lung cancer is prevention.

More than 85% of lung cancers are related to tobacco smoke. If you are a smoker, try to STOP SMOKING. The risk of lung cancer decreases after stopping smoking, although it remains higher than normal even after ten years of not smoking. If you are a non-smoker, make your home and work environments smoke free if possible. Don't start smoking — smoking increases your risk of developing many types of cancer as well as lung cancer.

If you are exposed to dust and fumes at work, ask questions about how you are being protected.

Avoid exposing yourself to asbestos. If you come across asbestos at work or when renovating your home, ask for advice on how to remove it safely. Don't try to deal with it yourself.

### **The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you**

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at [asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz](http://asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz)

For further information on lung cancer visit [lungnet.org.au](http://lungnet.org.au) and [cancerquest.org](http://cancerquest.org)