

Medical scheme

LUNG CANCER

This information sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

What is lung cancer?

In South Africa, the estimated lifetime risk for women developing LUNG CANCER is one in 232, whilst in men it is estimated that one in 76 men will develop lung cancer. It has a strong link to cigarette smoking and, to a lesser degree, with exposure to asbestos.

There are various categories of lung cancer. They are broadly categorised as *small cell* and *non-small cell lung cancer*. These two categories is an indication of the natural development of cancer, and guides the type of treatment needed and the expected outcome.

What are the symptoms of lung cancer?

Because the early symptoms of the condition are not necessarily specific to lung cancer, patients are often not diagnosed until later.

Symptoms that should alert patients include coughing up blood, increasing shortness of breath, persistent cough or a change in the nature of a chronic cough, hoarseness and chest pain. General symptoms include weight loss and tiredness. Patients may also have secondary symptoms due to the spreading of the condition to other parts of the body.

How do is lung cancer detected?

To establish a diagnosis and to determine the extent of the condition, the following tests are done:

- Chest X-ray
- An examination of the inside of the lungs using a bronchoscope (bronchoscopy); cells can also be removed from suspicious areas in the lung by using a biopsy needle (called a needle aspiration); sometimes more invasive procedures are necessary to obtain a definite diagnosis
- Sputum specimens to check for cancer cells and infections
- Computed tomography (CT) scan of the chest
- Ultrasound or CT scan of the upper abdomen
- Radioisotope scans to check whether the cancer has spread to the bones
- Blood tests to check blood counts in preparation for chemotherapy as well as to check for spread of disease to other organs.

Your doctor may require further investigation depending on your symptoms at the time of the tests.

What are the treatment options?

Treatment will depend on the nature and extent of the condition, as well as on your general state of health.

Non-small cell cancer

Treatment options include surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and various combinations of these treatment methods in various sequences. The choice of therapy will be determined by the stage of the condition, co-existing medical disorders (e.g. emphysema, diabetes or heart problems) and general wellbeing. The different treatment options will be explained and discussed with the patient.

Small cell lung cancer

Chemotherapy plays a crucial role in the treatment of small cell lung cancer. Often the treatment options mentioned above may be additional, depending on the stage of the condition, the patient's general condition and their preference. Unfortunately, the patients initially respond very well to the chemotherapy but eventually develop resistance. Therefore, treatment becomes more about relieving symptoms and slightly improving the patient's chance of survival.

References

1. CANCER ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN (CANSAs). Website. <http://www.cansa.org.za>.
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3. UPTODATE. *Lung Cancer*. <http://www.uptodate.com/home/index.html>.

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