



## The Patient with Lung Cancer: Care and Support

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After reading the newsletter, the nursing assistant should be able to:

1. Identify two types of lung cancer, symptoms and common treatment.
2. Identify common needs of the patient with lung cancer.
3. Discuss care that helps to promote the patient's health and comfort.

Cancer is a group of diseases caused by the abnormal growth and spread of body cells. It can affect just about any organ or tissue in the body, and may spread to many other body sites. One of the most common sites for cancer to develop is the lung.

According to the National Cancer Institute, lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the US. Data from 2013 indicate that over 228,000 new cases were diagnosed, and close to 160,000 deaths occurred due to lung cancer. This accounts for over 27% of all cancer deaths in the US.

This newsletter will discuss lung cancer, including causes, signs and symptoms, diagnosis and treatment. The role of the nursing assistant in providing care for patients with lung cancer will also be covered.

### Lung Cancer Overview

Like any cancer, lung cancer begins with the abnormal growth and development of cells. These abnormal cells tend to grow very rapidly. They can invade nearby tissue, causing serious damage to affected organs. The cells can also be carried to other areas of the body by the lymphatic system or blood stream. This process is called metastasis, and allows the abnormal cells to invade organs or tissues far away from the first, or primary, site.



Cells are most likely to become abnormal when they are damaged. This is why skin cancer is associated with skin damage due to sun exposure, and why lung cancer is associated with smoking. Cancer can also occur as the

result of genetic influences causing abnormal cell growth.

Smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer, causing an estimated 90% of cases. Persons at highest risk of lung cancer include those aged 55 and older who currently smoke or who have smoked in the past. Non-smokers can also develop lung cancer, with the most common causes for them being genetic factors and exposure to second-hand smoke, asbestos, radon or other toxins.



Lung cancer is grouped into two main types, small cell and non-small cell cancer. Small cell lung cancer is the more aggressive type. It tends to spread quickly, and has the lowest survival rate. Non-small cell cancer is the more common type, accounting for up to 90% of lung cancers. Both types can spread, most commonly metastasizing to the bone, liver, brain and/or other lung.

Symptoms of lung cancer include worsening cough, chest pain, shortness of breath and coughing up blood. Weight loss and fatigue are also common.

### Diagnosis & Treatment

A variety of tests can be used to diagnose lung cancer. Because the overgrowth of cells results in a tumor, this can often be visualized on imaging tests, such as a chest X-ray or CT scan. Other tests may include a sputum specimen to check for cancer cells or a biopsy, in which a needle is inserted to withdraw lung tissue or fluid for examination.

Treatment of lung cancer is challenging, and does not cure most people. Fewer than 17% of persons survive five years or more after diagnosis. Treatment may include surgery to remove the tumor and surrounding lung tissue, chemotherapy, radiation or laser therapy.

### **Care and Support**

The patient with lung cancer has many needs, including physical, emotional and psychosocial. Care is focused on:

**Promoting Nutrition:** The body needs calories and high-quality nutrients, especially protein, to help repair cells damaged by cancer or its treatment methods. Unfortunately, these patients often suffer effects that interfere with good nutrition, such as nausea, vomiting, altered taste/smell, and mouth sores. As a result, weight loss is common. Many patients find it easier to eat small meals frequently throughout the day, rather than three larger ones. Soft, cool, foods that are bland and easy to swallow are often preferred, such as pudding or gelatin. A liquid supplement, such as Ensure, may be used to provide additional nutrients and calories.

Allow plenty of time for the patient to eat slowly, and offer assistance as needed. Document the amount eaten at meals, and let the nurse know if your patient's intake appears low. Encourage snacking throughout the day by offering milkshakes, pudding or other foods that the patient enjoys.

**Improving Oxygenation:** Patients with lung cancer commonly experience shortness of breath and poor oxygenation. These patients are usually most comfortable with the head elevated. Avoid laying them flat if this causes shortness of breath. If oxygen is in use, make sure that it stays at the



prescribed amount. Always observe oxygen safety precautions, ensuring that no one smokes or has open flames nearby. Make sure a sign is posted at the door warning that oxygen is in use. Frequent mouth care is needed, every 2 hours, since oxygen therapy can be very drying.

As you work with these patients, watch carefully for signs that they are not getting enough oxygen, especially when moving around or exerting themselves. These signs may include increased respiratory rate (over 24/min), increased pulse rate (over 100/min.), labored breathing, and pale or bluish skin color. Also watch for and report signs of respiratory infection, such as increased congestion and mucous production, fever, or chest pain.

**Preserving Energy:** Fatigue is common in patients with lung cancer, due to poor oxygenation, medical treatments, and the disease process. Because energy

is in such short supply, patients with lung cancer must learn to pace themselves where activity is concerned. You can help by spacing out activities during the day, allowing for periods of rest. Activities should be prioritized based on the patient's needs. For example, getting good nutrition by eating breakfast is more important than having a bath in the morning. If the patient is too fatigued to do both, the meal should take priority, and bathing can be delayed until the patient has rested.

**Promoting Hygiene:** Regular bathing and oral care promotes healthy tissues and the patient's self-esteem. The patient's skin is often sensitive, so use mild cleanser and a gentle touch when bathing. Do not wash off any markings on the skin made for radiation therapy, and do not rub this area with a washcloth. Use clear water only... do not apply soap, powder, or lotion to the area unless directed by the nurse or physician. Mouth care is very important to remove irritating food particles and helps to prevent fungal infection. Sore, bleeding gums are a common side effect of cancer treatment, so be very gentle. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush or foam swab to thoroughly clean the mouth. If regular toothpaste is too irritating, use plain water or a saline solution recommended by the nurse or doctor.



**Preventing Infection:** Patients with lung cancer are often at increased risk for infection, due to their illness and/or treatment. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly while working with the patient. The patient should not be exposed to crowds or persons with illnesses, such as colds or flu. Watch for and report any signs of infection, such as areas of redness or warmth, fever, cough, cloudy urine, or painful urination.

**Supporting Coping:** Coping with a life-threatening illness is very challenging for the patient and family members. You can help by being a good listener. Let the patient or family member talk freely about their feelings, which commonly include anxiety, fear, anger, numbness, or despair. Avoid feeling that you should "fix" anything or offer advice. This is a very complex issue, and many times, there are no answers. Let them know you have heard them, with statements that reflect what they have said, such as, "It sounds like you're worried about what the future holds." Of course, avoid patronizing and possibly untrue comments, such as "Everything will be OK." Let the nurse know if the patient seems depressed or anxious, since treatment may be needed.

Patients with lung cancer, and their families, face many physical and emotional challenges. Your compassionate and knowledgeable care can promote effective coping and improved quality of life.