

Among the many observances that take place in November, lung cancer awareness is one that certainly should not be overlooked. The American Lung Association states that approximately 373,489 Americans are currently living with lung cancer. This disease causes more deaths than the next three most common cancers combined (colon, breast and prostate!) Even more shockingly, most of these cases of lung cancer could have been prevented. It is estimated that approximately 90 percent of lung cancer cases are caused by active smoking.

Although the majority of lung cancers are caused by smoking tobacco, there are also lung cancers that occur in non-smokers as well. Radon, a natural occurring radioactive gas that results from the breakdown of uranium in soil and rocks, is the second leading cause of lung cancer in this country, and is the leading cause among non-smokers. Radon is found in little quantities outside. However, radon can be more concentrated indoors which can increase a person's risk of lung cancer. Other causes of lung cancer can include: asbestos exposure, air pollution, radiation therapy to the lungs, and personal or family history of lung cancer.

What are some things that you can do to lower your risk of lung cancer? The best way to reduce your risk of lung cancer is abstain from smoking and to avoid breathing in other people's tobacco smoke (secondhand smoke.) If you stop smoking before cancer develops, your lung tissue will start to repair itself and your risk of lung cancer will decrease. You can also reduce your risk by having your home tested for radon and treated if needed. A healthy diet with lots of fruits and vegetables may also help reduce your risk of lung cancer.

Most lung cancers do not present with any symptoms until they have spread too far to be cured. However, some people can experience symptoms in the early stages of lung cancer when treatment is more likely to be effective. The most common symptoms of lung cancer are:

- A cough that does not go away or gets worse
- Chest pain that is often worse with deep breathing, coughing, or laughing
- Hoarseness
- Weight loss and loss of appetite
- Coughing up blood or rust-colored sputum (spit or phlegm)
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling tired or weak
- Infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia that don't go away or keep coming back
- New onset of wheezing

Most of the symptoms listed above are more likely to be caused by conditions other than lung cancer. Still, if you experience any of these symptoms, you should bring them to your doctor's attention to find the cause and get treatment if needed.