

Quit smoking, get screened to avoid lung cancer

By Tara Thomas-Gettman, for The Gazette

Much like former television news anchor Katie Couric undergoing a colonoscopy impacted public opinion about the screening, dubbed "The Couric Effect," a similar, albeit more localized reverberation could result in Iowa from Governor Kim Reynolds announcing her husband has lung cancer.

"There are usually no signs or symptoms of lung cancer," explains Mallory Kaemmer, St. Luke's Nassif Community Cancer Center Radiation Oncology Supervisor and Lung Screen Coordinator for the past eight years.

"Some individuals will be more fatigued than normal, out of breath. We do see patients who come into our lung screening program every year to keep track of nodules to verify that they have not grown suspicious during that year. But a lot of times lung cancers can be accidental findings so

it's important to get screened if you meet the criteria."

Kaemmer says to prevent getting lung cancer, you should avoid smoking and secondhand smoke, continue to form healthy habits, and get screened for lung cancer if you meet the following criteria:

- Between 50 and 77 years of age
- Asymptomatic (no lung cancer signs or symptoms)
- History of tobacco smoking of at least twenty pack-years (the equivalent of smoking twenty cigarettes per day for twenty years)
- Current smoker or quit smoking within the past fifteen years
- Lung cancer screening order
- No CT of chest within the past year

If you meet these criteria, you should speak with your primary care provider to have a lung screening.

Dr. Amal Elbakush is a Pulmonary/Critical Care Specialist and Director of Critical Care at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids. Though multiple things can contribute to lung cancer, she says tobacco is behind the vast majority of cases.

"Cigarette smoking accounts for approximately 90 percent of all lung cancers. Smokers are 10 to 30 times more likely to get lung cancer compared to non-smokers. Asbestos exposure is an established risk factor for lung cancer especially if complicated by lung fibrosis."

WHAT ELSE CAN CAUSE IT?

"Radon," adds Elbakush. "Increased concentrations of radon gas in homes are associated with a small but significant increase in the risk of lung cancer. In one study, it was estimated that radon exposure could be responsible for up to 2 percent of lung cancer deaths in Europe."

Other contributors she mentioned include smoke from indoor burning of unprocessed biomass fuels, air pollution and diesel exhaust, radiation, genetic factors and certain lung diseases.

Tricia Bedenbender is a Manager and Technologist at Muscatine Radiology in Muscatine. She says that according to the American Cancer Society, lung cancer is likely to develop in one out of every 16 men and one out of every 17 women. "In the United States, it is the second most common cancer



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in both men and women, and the leading cause of cancer death, with the average age of diagnosis being 70."

SIGNS OR SYMPTOMS?

- A cough that does not improve over time
- Blood in sputum when coughing
- Chest pain that gets worse with coughing/breathing
- Loss of appetite
- Unexplained weight loss
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue, weakness and wheezing that is new

Unfortunately, "these symptoms can be vague because they are commonly correlated with routine upper respiratory illnesses," Bedenbender adds.

The good news is lung cancer treatments are advancing. Mercy Medical Center uses an innovative bronchoscopy system, which "is a procedure we use to diagnose and stage lung cancer. In the last few

years, robotic bronchoscopy has been the latest advanced technology used to diagnose lung cancer," shares Elbakush. "It helps reaching nodules that were previously very difficult, and sometimes impossible to reach."

Bedenbender offers similar optimism. "There have been multiple new treatment options that have emerged in even the last few years. A lot of new targeted medications have been approved by the FDA, including a pill you just take daily."

She explains that current treatments for lung cancer can include surgery to remove it, radiofrequency ablation, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, drug therapy and immunotherapy.

"Statistics for survival will depend on which type of lung cancer a patient has, and which treatment route the patient chooses to take. However, the average five-year survival rate for a localized lung cancer, meaning it was likely found early, can be as high as 65 percent."

Advice to prevent lung cancer comes down to five words among these providers: quit smoking and get screened.

"If you quit smoking your risk goes down by 20 to 90 percent. The risk reduction becomes evident within five years," according to Elbakush. "Studies have shown that former smokers who have been abstinent for more than fifteen years had an 80 to 90 percent reduction in risk of lung cancer compared with current smokers. Adults who quit smoking gain 6 to 10 years of life expectancy, depending on the age that they quit."



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