

MedStar Georgetown releases a quarterly newsletter for patients that contains success stories and educational pieces from various hospital departments. I was the ghost writer for an article by the head of the hospital's Emergency Department.

The Deadliest Cancer Is Also the Most Preventable

By Chief of Service, Emergency Department

When it comes to cancer, everyone knows what pink ribbons symbolize—but what about white? Breast cancer is more common, but many people don't know that lung cancer, with its white ribbon, causes the most cancer deaths in both women and men.

While lung cancer is the deadliest, it's also the most preventable. The American Cancer Society estimates that tobacco usage is responsible for more than 75 percent of lung cancer deaths, which makes quitting smoking the single-most important factor in decreasing the risk of developing lung cancer.

Who's at risk for lung cancer?

Lung cancer is more common in men than women, especially black men, and the average patient is about 70 years old. While smokers are at the greatest risk, non-smokers can also develop lung cancer. Some research suggests that women who have never smoked are more likely to develop lung cancer than non-smoking men, and those women will develop it younger.

What causes lung cancer?

Although family history and environment play a role, the major risk factor for developing lung cancer is smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke. In fact, smoking has been linked to a higher incidence of twelve different kinds of cancer.

The Journal of the National Cancer Institute has found that tobacco smoke contains at least 55 carcinogens, including cyanide, arsenic, and formaldehyde. Inhaling the smoke, whether it's first or secondhand, dumps those chemicals into the lungs, where it causes immediate damage.

Risks of secondhand smoke

Even if you don't smoke, simply being exposed to smoke secondhand, called involuntary smoking, can cause lung cancer and heart disease. Researchers have found that involuntary smokers have a 20-30 percent greater chance of developing lung cancer, and the risk for heart disease is almost as great as it is for smokers themselves.

Associated risks of smoking

Cancer isn't the only life-threatening side effect of smoking. Smokers are at a much higher risk for stroke, heart disease, chronic respiratory infections, and Type II diabetes, which explains why, on average, smokers die about ten years earlier than non-smokers.

When to see a doctor

If you are a smoker and have a lingering cough, hoarseness, and chest pain, don't assume it's a cold—go get checked out. By the time symptoms appear, lung cancer is often in an advanced stage and difficult to treat.

Prevention and quitting smoking

Eradicating tobacco use would save nearly half a million lives per year, and would eliminate more than 80 percent of lung cancer cases. Quitting smoking is one of the best ways to improve quality of life, and it's never too late to reap the benefits of quitting.

Smokers who are ready to quit should schedule a visit with their doctor; having the support of a physician doubles a smoker's chances of successfully quitting. Free services like Quitline (1-800-QUIT-NOW) and smokefree.gov, provide coaching and resources for smokers to help make quitting stick.

To learn more about smoking cessation or to make an appointment with one of our physicians, call ###. For more information about emergency, urgent and trauma care, visit XXXX.com or call XXX.

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