

Lung cancer

What is lung cancer?

Lung cancer is cancer of some of the cells in part of your lung. It usually starts in the lining of an airway.

There are many different types of lung cancer, classified by the type of cell affected. The two main types are:

- small cell lung cancer
- non-small cell lung cancer.

Small cell lung cancer

Also called oat cell carcinoma because the cells are shaped like oats.

- Makes up around 15% of lung cancers.
- Very strongly linked with cigarette smoking.
- Tends to start in the middle of the lungs.
- Surgery is not often used for small cell lung cancer because it usually spreads early.
- Responds best to drugs (chemotherapy) usually combined with radiotherapy.

Non-small cell lung cancer

- Includes squamous cell carcinoma, adenocarcinoma, large cell carcinoma and bronchiolo-alveolar cell carcinoma.
- Affect the cells that line the tubes into the lungs (main bronchi) and smaller airways.
- If a non-small cell lung cancer is confined to a part of the lung, it might be able to be removed by an operation. Some tumours, even if they have not spread, cannot be removed safely by surgery.
- Non-surgery treatments may also be needed in other cases, where the tumour has spread into the chest wall, lymph nodes or to other parts of the body.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is not, strictly speaking, a lung cancer. It is a tumour of the pleural membranes on the surface of the lungs and is strongly linked to asbestos exposure.

What causes lung cancer?

The following factors increase the risk of developing lung cancer. Some people develop lung cancer without any of these risk factors.

Smoking

- Cigarette smoking is the major cause of lung cancer.
- Smoking causes up to 90% of lung cancer.
- It is not known why one smoker develops lung cancer and another does not.

- Lung cancer is unusual under the age of 40.
- Risk increases markedly after the age of 50.
- The younger someone started smoking, the higher their risk of getting lung cancer.
- One in 10 smokers will develop lung cancer.
- Passive (environmental) tobacco smoke causes lung cancer but the risks are less than if you yourself smoke.

Work-related risks

Exposure to asbestos at work is associated with an increased risk of lung cancer and mesothelioma. The greater the exposure to asbestos, the greater the risk of lung cancer. The risk is even greater if the person has been a smoker too.

Other work-related exposure that may be linked with lung cancer includes contact with the processing of steel, nickel, chrome and coal gas. Exposure to radiation increases the risk of all cancers, including lung. Miners may be exposed to radiation by breathing air contaminated with radon gas.

More information

Dust Diseases Board toll free 1800 550 027

Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia on (02) 9637 8759 or visit www.adfa.org.au

How common is it?

About 244 people are diagnosed with lung cancer each year in Tasmania.

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20