

Lung cancer

This fact sheet is about how lung cancer is diagnosed and treated.

We also have fact sheets in your language about chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery, side effects of cancer treatment, what you can do to help yourself, claiming benefits and end of life.

We hope this fact sheet answers your questions. If you have any more questions, you can ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having your treatment.

If you would like to talk to our cancer support specialists about this information in your language, we have interpreters for non-English speakers. You can call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm. If you have problems hearing you can use textphone **0808 808 0121**, or Text Relay. Or you can go to our website **macmillan.org.uk**

This fact sheet is about:

- What is cancer?
- The lungs
- Types of lung cancer
- Causes and risk factors
- Symptoms
- How is lung cancer diagnosed?
- Staging
- Treatment
- Clinical trials
- Controlling symptoms
- Follow up
- Your feelings
- More information in your language

What is cancer?

The organs and tissues of the body are made up of tiny building blocks called cells. Cancer is a disease of these cells.

Cells in each part of the body are different but most mend and reproduce themselves in the same way. Normally, cells divide in an orderly way. But if the process gets out of control, the cells carry on dividing and develop into a lump called a tumour.

Not all tumours are cancer. Doctors can tell if a tumour is cancer by removing a small sample of tissue or cells from it. This is called a biopsy. The doctors examine the sample under a microscope to look for cancer cells.

In a benign (non-cancerous) tumour, the cells may grow but cannot spread anywhere else in the body. It usually only causes problems if it puts pressure on nearby organs.

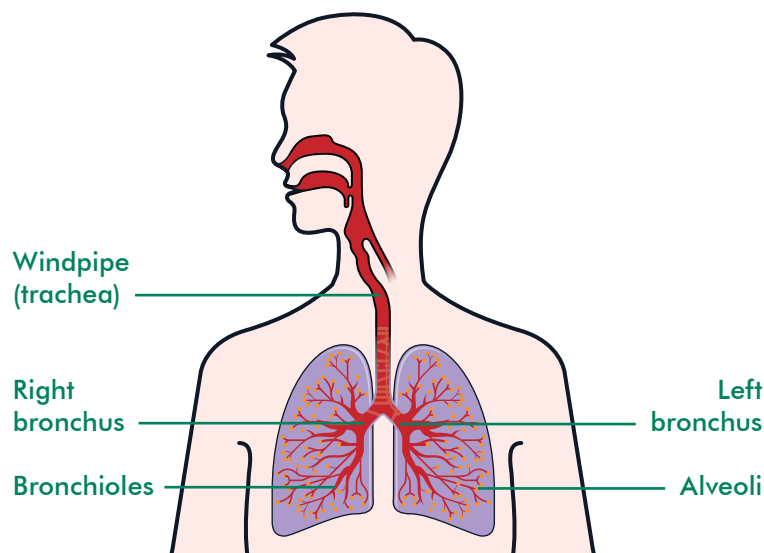
In a malignant (cancerous) tumour, the cells grow into nearby tissue. Sometimes, cancer cells spread from where the cancer first started (the primary site) to other parts of the body. They can travel through the blood or lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system helps to protect us from infection and disease. It's made up of fine tubes called lymphatic vessels. These connect to groups of bean-shaped lymph nodes (glands) all over the body.

When the cells reach another part of the body they begin to grow and form another tumour. This is called secondary cancer or a metastasis.

The lungs

We have two lungs in our chest that help us to breathe in and out. The right lung has three sections (called lobes) and the left lung has two.



The lungs

When we breathe in, air passes from our nose or mouth through the windpipe (trachea). This divides into two tubes, one going to each lung. These are known as the right and left bronchus. They divide into smaller tubes called bronchioles. At the end of the bronchioles are millions of tiny air sacs called alveoli.

Types of lung cancer

There are two main types of lung cancer:

- non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)
- small cell lung cancer (SCLC)

About 15% of lung cancers (less than 1 in 5) are small cell lung cancer; the rest are non-small cell lung cancer.

Causes and risk factors

Smoking – Most lung cancers are caused by people smoking cigarettes. The more you smoke, the more likely you are to get lung cancer. People who start smoking at a young age are also at more risk. Smoking pipes, cigars or cannabis can also increase your risk of getting lung cancer.

People who don't smoke or used to smoke can also get lung cancer. About 10–15% of people who get lung cancer have never smoked.

Other risk factors include:

- **Age** – 80% of lung cancers are diagnosed in people over 60.
- **Exposure to asbestos**
- **Exposure to radon gas**
- **Genetic risk** – If a close relative of yours has had lung cancer you may be at an increased risk.

Lung cancer is not infectious and can't be passed on to other people.

Symptoms

The symptoms of lung cancer include:

- a cough that lasts three weeks or more
- a change in a long-lasting cough
- a chest infection that doesn't get better
- increased breathlessness and wheezing
- coughing up blood in your sputum (phlegm)
- a hoarse voice

- a dull ache or sharp pain when you cough
- loss of appetite or weight loss
- difficulty swallowing
- excessive tiredness (fatigue) and lethargy.

If you have any of these symptoms for more than three weeks, it's important to see your GP. All of these symptoms can be caused by illnesses other than cancer.

How is lung cancer diagnosed?

Your GP will examine you and arrange some tests. If your GP thinks your symptoms could be lung cancer, they will send you for an urgent chest x-ray. Depending on the result, you may then be referred to a hospital for specialist advice and treatment.

At the hospital

The specialist will ask you about your general health and any previous medical problems before examining you. If you haven't already had one, you will have a chest x-ray.

You may have one or more of the tests below.

Bronchoscopy – a doctor or nurse will examine the insides of the lung airways and may take samples of the cells. Before the test, you cannot eat or drink anything for a few hours. You will be given a local anaesthetic and sedation before a thin, flexible tube is passed up your nose or mouth and into your lungs. The test takes about 20 minutes and you may go home after a few hours.

CT (computerised tomography) scan – A CT scan takes a series of x-rays, which builds up a 3D picture of the inside of the body. The scan takes 10-30 minutes and doesn't hurt. It uses a small amount of radiation. This is very unlikely to harm you and will not harm anyone you come into contact with. You cannot eat or drink for at least 4 hours before the scan.

You may be given a drink or injection of a dye, which allows some areas to be seen more clearly. This can make you feel hot all over for a few minutes. It is important to let your doctor know if you are allergic to iodine or have asthma, because you could have a more serious reaction to the injection.

PET-CT scan – this is a combination of a CT scan and a PET (positron emission tomograph) scan. PET-CT scans give more detailed information about the size of the cancer, and whether it has spread beyond the lungs.

Lung biopsy – This test is usually done in the x-ray department; normally during a CT scan. A local anaesthetic is used to numb the area. You'll be asked to hold your breath while a thin needle is passed through the skin and into the lung. An x-ray is used throughout the procedure to make sure the needle is in the right place. The doctors will take a sample of cells to examine under a microscope. The biopsy may be uncomfortable, but it only takes a few minutes. You can go home a few hours after the biopsy.

Fine needle aspiration – a doctor or nurse may use a fine needle to take a sample of cells from the lymph nodes in your neck.

After a lung biopsy there is a small risk you may develop air between the layers that cover the lungs. This is known as a **pneumothorax**. Symptoms include sharp chest pain, breathlessness and a tight chest. Tell your nurse if you have any of these symptoms.

Further tests

If lung cancer is confirmed then you may have some other tests. These may be used to prepare you for an operation or to find out more about the cancer. They include:

- mediastinoscopy
- endobronchial ultrasound scan (EBUS)
- endoscopic ultrasound (EUS)
- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan
- abdominal ultrasound scan
- isotope bone scan
- lung function tests.

Your doctor or nurse will explain which tests you need and what will happen.

Waiting for test results can be an anxious time for you. It may help to talk about your worries with a relative or friend. You could also speak to one of our cancer support specialists in your language on **0808 808 00 00**.

Staging

Knowing the stage of your cancer helps doctors decide the right treatment for you. Lung cancer is divided into four stages:

- **Stage 1** The cancer is small and only in the lung
- **Stages 2 or 3** The cancer has spread into areas around the lung
- **Stage 4** The cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

There is another system of staging for small cell lung cancer that divides it into limited disease and extensive disease. Your doctor will explain this system if they are using it.

To be safe, small cell lung cancers are usually treated as though they have spread.

Treatment

Deciding on the best treatment isn't always easy. Your doctor will need to think about a lot of things. The most important of these are:

- your general health
- the stage of the cancer
- the likely benefits of treatment
- the likely side effects of treatment
- your views about the possible side effects.

It's important to talk about any treatment with your doctor, so that you understand what it means. It's a good idea to take someone with you who can speak both your language and English. Interpreters may be available if you need one, but try to let the hospital know before if you would like one to be there.

You might have a specialist nurse who can talk to you about treatment. They can also help with any problems you may have in between appointments.

You will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you understand and agree to the treatment. You will not have any treatment unless you have agreed to it.

Surgery

Surgery is often used to remove cancer. It can be used to remove non-small cell lung cancers that are small and haven't spread. Surgery is rarely used to treat people with small cell lung cancer.

The three main types of surgery for lung cancer are a:

- **Lobectomy** – removes a lobe of the lung
- **Pneumonectomy** – removes a whole lung
- **Wedge resection** – removes a small part of the lung.

The type of operation you have will depend on the size and position of the tumour.

People often worry that they won't be able to breathe properly if their lung has been removed. But you can breathe normally with one lung. If you had breathing difficulties before the operation, you may still have them after it.

We have more information in your language about how surgery is planned and what to expect after the operation.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is a treatment that uses anti-cancer (cytotoxic) drugs to destroy cancer cells. The drugs are carried in the blood and can reach anywhere in the body.

Chemotherapy is the main treatment for small cell lung cancer. It can help with symptoms such as breathlessness, coughing, coughing up blood and chest pain.

In non-small cell lung cancer, chemotherapy is sometimes used after surgery to reduce the risk of the cancer coming back. It may also shrink tumours before surgery or relieve symptoms if surgery is not possible.

We have more information in your language about how chemotherapy is given and some of the side effects you may have.

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses a machine to aim high-energy rays from outside the body to destroy the cancer cells, while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells.

Radiotherapy for small cell lung cancer

Radiotherapy is sometimes used to treat limited-stage small cell lung cancer. You may have it after chemotherapy (adjuvant radiotherapy) if the cancer has shrunk a lot or disappeared after the chemotherapy.

Sometimes you will have radiotherapy at the same time as chemotherapy. This is called chemoradiation. The two treatments can help to stop small cell lung cancer coming back and may help to completely remove any signs of the cancer. Giving chemotherapy and radiotherapy together can make the side effects of these treatments worse. Your doctor or nurse can give you more information about chemoradiation.

Small cell lung cancer can sometimes spread to the brain. You may be given a type of radiotherapy called prophylactic cranial radiotherapy to your head to reduce the risk of this happening. It may be given to people with small cell lung cancer if chemotherapy has worked very well, or if they have had surgery to remove the tumour.

Radiotherapy for non-small cell lung cancer

You may have radiotherapy that aims to cure non-small cell lung cancer (called radical radiotherapy). This can be used instead of surgery. There are different ways of having radical radiotherapy and your doctor will explain your treatment.

If the tumour is blocking one of the airways, you may have internal radiotherapy called endobronchial radiotherapy or brachytherapy. A solid radioactive source is placed close to the tumour for a few minutes using a bronchoscope. It is then removed. This treatment can be repeated two or three times. The radiotherapy goes directly to the tumour so healthy tissue will not be affected much. This means there are few side effects.

Palliative radiotherapy may be used to control symptoms. Fewer treatments are given and they usually have fewer side effects.

External radiotherapy does not make you radioactive and it is safe for you to be with other people, including children, after your treatment.

We have more information in your language about how radiotherapy is planned and given, and some of the side effects you may have.

Targeted therapies for non-small cell lung cancer

Targeted therapies work on the difference between cancer cells and normal cells and try to stop cancer cells growing. Your doctor or nurse can tell you more about these treatments if you can have them.

Radiofrequency ablation for non-small cell lung cancer

This treatment uses heat to destroy cancer cells. It's only used if you have a very early-stage non-small cell lung cancer and other treatments are not suitable.

You will be given a local anaesthetic and sedation before the treatment. In some cases, general anaesthetic is used instead. Your doctor will place a needle into the lung tumour. This is usually done using a CT scanner to make sure the needle is in the right place. Radiowaves are then passed down the needle into the tumour to heat and destroy the cancer cells.

There are very few side effects with this treatment, although it's common for people to have some pain or discomfort and to feel tired afterwards. You'll usually need to stay in hospital overnight.

Photodynamic therapy (PDT)

Photodynamic therapy (PDT) uses lasers or other light sources, combined with a light-sensitive drug (sometimes called a **photosensitising agent**) to destroy cancer cells.

PDT can sometimes be used if the cancer is only growing into the wall of one of the main airways (**endobronchial cancer**) and is at a very early stage.

The light-sensitive drug is given as a liquid into a vein. Once the drug is taken up by the cancer cells, the laser light is directed at the tumour using a bronchoscope.

PDT will make you sensitive to light for a couple of days to a few months, depending on the photosensitising drug used. You will need to avoid bright light during this time. Other side effects include swelling, inflammation, breathlessness and a cough.

Controlling the symptoms of lung cancer

New symptoms can sometimes develop during your illness, such as breathlessness or a cough. These may be caused by the cancer, but they may also have another cause. If you have any new symptoms, tell your doctor straight away so that you can be treated.

Breathlessness – can be a distressing symptom to deal with. There are treatments and exercises that can help to relieve or manage your breathlessness, and things you can do to make living with breathlessness easier. These include different drugs, complementary therapies, and breathing and relaxation techniques.

Cough – About 80% of patients with lung cancer have a cough, and there are treatments to help ease this. These can include external beam radiotherapy, palliative chemotherapy or medications.

Pleural effusion – Occasionally, cancer in the lung can cause fluid to build up between the layers that cover the lung (pleural effusion). Your doctor can usually drain the fluid by inserting a needle (cannula) into the area. The needle is attached to a tube and the fluid passes into a drainage bag or bottle. Sometimes, it's possible to seal the two layers of the pleura together again.

Pain – Some people with lung cancer feel pain. This can usually be controlled with painkillers and other methods of pain control. You may also have pain if the cancer has spread to the bones. There are different medications, such as bisphosphonates, that might help with the pain. Your doctor may recommend a short course of radiotherapy.

Clinical trials

Cancer research trials are carried out to try to find new and better treatments for cancer. Trials that are carried out on patients are called clinical trials. Many hospitals now take part in these trials. Speak to your doctor about current lung cancer research.

Follow up

Your doctor or specialist nurse will probably want you to have regular check-ups and x-rays. This is a good time to discuss any problems you may have. If you notice any new symptoms in between these appointments, tell your doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

Your feelings

You may feel overwhelmed when you are told you have cancer and have many different emotions. These can include anger, resentment, guilt, anxiety and fear. These are all normal reactions and are part of the process many people go through in trying to come to terms with their illness. There is no right or wrong way to feel. You'll cope with things in your own way.

More information in your language

- Breast cancer fact sheet
- Chemotherapy fact sheet
- Claiming benefits fact sheet
- Large bowel cancer fact sheet
- Prostate cancer fact sheet
- Radiotherapy fact sheet
- Side effects of cancer treatment fact sheet
- Surgery fact sheet
- What you can do to help yourself fact sheet

This fact sheet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our medical editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Consultant Clinical Oncologist.

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We have used information from many reliable sources to write this fact sheet. These include:

- Crinò L, et al. Early stage and locally advanced (non-metastatic) non-small cell lung cancer: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up. European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO). 2010.
- D'Addario, et al. Metastatic non-small cell lung cancer: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up. European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO). 2010.
- *Lung Cancer. The Diagnosis and Treatment of Lung Cancer.* National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). February 2011.

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