

Shining a Light on the Clear Ribbon of Lung Cancer

November is Lung Cancer awareness month.

Lung Cancer is a disease that has been symbolized by the clear ribbon because it often goes overlooked. However, Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, and Lung Cancer remains the number one cause of cancer related deaths. Fortunately, progress has been made in decreasing Lung Cancer; there has been a steady decline in the rate of Lung Cancer since 1990 in men and most recently in 2002 in women.

The primary reason for decreases in Lung Cancer is the public health push to decrease tobacco use. The association between smoking and Lung Cancer has been known for many years, starting with the Surgeon General's Warning in 1964. Recent legislation banning smoking in public places and rising taxes on cigarettes have probably contributed highly to the declines in smoking. In 2001, the United States government won a landmark settlement against tobacco companies.

Still, It is estimated that 900 cigarettes are produced for every man, woman, and child on the planet. Approximately 56 million people in the United States continue to smoke despite all of the evidence linking smoking to Lung Cancer as well as emphysema, heart disease, stroke, and peripheral vascular disease. As a doctor, one of the most important things I can do is to help people quit smoking. If you or a loved one smokes, please consider these five helpful hints:

- It is hard get someone to quit unless they know it is important.
- Most people take multiple attempts before they quit, so keep trying!
- Cigarettes are getting more expensive- \$1500/pack/year.
- Nicotine patches and other prescription medications may help.
- Use procrastination as your friend. Wait an hour before you "allow" yourself a cigarette.

There is new hope for Lung Cancer screening. In the past, chest x-rays have not been shown to be beneficial. However, the results from the National Lung Cancer Trial (NLCT) have recently been announced showing a benefit to spiral CT scans in detecting early Lung Cancer to start earlier treatment. Specifically, there was a 20% reduction in deaths for high risk smokers defined as more than a 30 pack-year history.

While this news is exciting and promising, 25% of patients getting spiral CT scans were found to have false positives. These are abnormalities other than Lung Cancer which triggered unnecessary scans, biopsies, and even complications from these tests, not to mention stress and anxiety. If you talk to your doctor about spiral CT scans, understand that he or she may not recommend it because of these mixed results.

What is clear though this November is that if you know someone who smokes, please share your concern for their health. While a stigma has been raised against smoking, in some ways it has also brought a stigma to the people who smoke. Let's not allow our loved ones to feel shame or embarrassment, but instead inform them and empower them.

Dr. Christopher Chay

Dr. Christopher Chay, who joined Cancer Care of WNC in 2003. He graduated from UNC Chapel Hill Medical School and trained at both UNC Chapel Hill and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He is a member of the WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society is currently a board member for the WNC/BCMS Foundation.

About BCMS

Formed in 1885, WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society is a voluntary professional association of almost 900 physicians. The WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society is the physicians' voice advocating for the health of the medical profession, the health of the patient, and the health of the community.