

Breathe Easier with Lung Cancer Screenings: A Q&A with Mark Onaitis, MD

By Yadira Galindo | March 06, 2018

A ccording to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 7,000 chemicals are found in tobacco smoke and at least 70 of those are known carcinogens — making smoking cigarettes a very dangerous habit.

In fact, cigarette smoking is linked to up to 90 percent of lung cancers in the United States. People who smoke are 15 to 30 times more likely to be diagnosed with lung cancer than nonsmokers. This makes it vitally important to screen individuals at high risk of this disease. Detecting lung cancer early could dramatically improve a person's chance of surviving lung cancer by finding the disease when it is at a more treatable stage.



UC San Diego Health established a new lung cancer screening program to help current and former

or smokers determine their risk for lung cancer. The program is led by [Mark W. Onaitis, MD](#), a board-certified thoracic surgeon who specializes in malignant and benign conditions of the chest, including esophageal cancer, lung cancer and thymic malignancy.

Question: Who should be screened for lung cancer?

Answer: Many insurance plans, including Medicare, cover lung cancer screening for patients age 55 to 77, who are current smokers or former smokers who quit smoking within the past 15 years, who have a smoking history of 30 or more years and who have no signs or symptoms of lung disease. The National Lung Screening Trial demonstrated a 20 percent reduction in lung cancer mortality in the screening group when compared to the non-screened group. This improvement in survival is mainly due to detecting cancers while they are small and early-stage and thus treatable.

Q: How often will the screenings occur?

A: Lung cancer screening consists of yearly low-dose CT scans of the chest. Suspicious lung nodules may be detected that require either close follow-up or biopsy/treatment. However, most scans are frequently negative.

Q: What does the test consist of?

A: Your screening includes a low-dose CT scan, also known as a computed tomography scan that produces cross-sectional images of your lungs using computer processed combinations of many X-rays taken from various angles. These images allow a radiologist to detect any signs of early-stage lung cancer. The scan takes about 20 to 30 seconds and does not require anesthesia.

Q: When will I get the results of the test?

A: We offer same-day screening and results. After your CT scan is complete, you will meet with a physician to review your results. Your physician will provide recommendations based on your scan. If the test does not reveal suspicious lesions, reassurance is provided and another scan is ordered for a year later. In addition, many have shown that an added health benefit to a screening program is the opportunity to undergo tobacco counseling. We have a certified smoking cessation expert that meets with the patient at each visit.

Q: What can I do to decrease my chances of developing lung cancer?

A: If you have not already, stop smoking. Research shows that even heavy smokers can significantly lower their risk of lung cancer when they quit smoking. As mentioned above, our lung cancer screening program has a tobacco treatment specialist on staff who can help you stop smoking. We have a variety of tools and support to help make this happen.

For more information about quitting or the lung cancer screening program, call 877-586-4727

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