

Script – Print – Saving Lives One Screening at a Time

More Than 10,000 Lives Have Been Saved by Lung Cancer Screening

A recent [study](#) published by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) shows that more than 10,000 lives have been saved in the United States since lung cancer screening was introduced for high-risk individuals who are 55 and older and have a history of smoking.

The results, which combined data from two cancer registries, show a 3.9% per year increase in early (stage I) detection of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), and an average 11.9% per year increase in median all cause survival rates from 2014 and 2018.

“The findings did show that, so far, lung cancer screening works,” says Dr. Iftekhar Ahmad, a radiation oncologist with OSF HealthCare. “With the people who are at risk we’re finding cancers that would not otherwise have been found, and we’re finding them at an early stage. As with many other cancers, treatment for lung cancer at an early stage has a much better prognosis so if you can treat lung cancer at stage 1 or 2 versus 3 or 4, you’re going to save a lot more lives.”

Although treatments for late-stage lung cancer have improved, early detection and treatment remain crucial in slowing mortality rates from the disease. Still, lung cancer is the leading cause of death due to cancer, due mostly to the fact that cases are often diagnosed at an advanced stage.

“The biggest challenge of lung cancer is, by the time it becomes symptomatic, it’s typically stage 3 or 4,” says Dr. Ahmad. “At stage 3 your cure rate is 30% at best and at stage 4 your cure rate is 0.”

That’s why, a low-dose CT scan for high-risk people was introduced in the U.S. in 2013, with the hopes of catching many more cancer cases at an earlier, more treatable stage.

“The thought was it’s such a common cancer, such a deadly cancer, what can we do, there’s something we can do to try and improve the chances people have, so that’s where it started,” says Dr. Ahmad. “Chest x-rays were not accurate enough to show small masses and the concern about CT scans was, are we subjecting people to unnecessary tests or too much radiation? So that’s where it all started but over time we’ve developed something that’s effective but also safe for patients.”

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends annual lung cancer screening for people who have a 20-pack per year or more smoking history; currently smoke or have quit in the past 15 years, and are between the ages of 50 and 80. The latest guidelines lowered the age to 50, which made an additional 6.5 million people eligible for screening.

Dr. Ahmad says the first step is having a conversation with your provider.

“If you find yourself between the ages of 50 and 80 with a 20-pack per year history of smoking or you currently smoke and it’s been that long, then I think it’s worth having a conversation with your primary care provider and let them know you’re interested in having a lung cancer screening CT scan done,” says Dr. Ahmad.

Still, there’s more work to do. The acceptance of lung cancer screening has been slow, and screening rates have remained low nationally due to several reasons, including fear of radiation exposure, stigmatization of smokers and lack of insurance coverage.

Dr. Ahmad remains optimistic that rates will improve.

“Over time I feel like the rates will go up and that means we’re going to catch a lot more lung cancer at an earlier stage.”

For more information on cancer services, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).