

PRINT-To scan or not to scan (for lung cancer)

There are stories of people diagnosed with lung cancer who never smoked a day in their life. It happens, and unfortunately, in most of those cases, the cancer isn't caught early enough because it's only found when symptoms become serious enough for someone to consult their health care provider.

Jill Emmons, a cancer navigator at OSF HealthCare in Alton, says lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S., killing more people than colon, breast and prostate cancers combined. It can be diagnosed using [low-dose computed tomography](#) (also called a low-dose CT scan, or LDCT). During an LDCT scan, you lie on a table and an X-ray machine uses a low amount of radiation to make detailed images of your lungs.

Emmons says for people who are eligible, it's important to consider getting a scan to find cancer early.

"If lung cancer is caught early, it is definitely more treatable. Sometimes patients don't come to us until they are already experiencing symptoms, and by that time, it can be at a later stage and metastasized and gone to other organs," Emmons points out.

You can qualify for a low-dose CT lung cancer screening if you are 55-80 years and:

- Are currently a smoker or quit within the past 15 years
- Smoked the equivalent of at least one pack of cigarettes a day for 30 years or two packs a day for 15 years
- Have a family or personal history of lung cancer
- Already have a chronic lung disease diagnosis
- Experienced exposure to radon (in many older homes)
- Have had exposure such as asbestos, industrial chemicals or coal products

Emmons says it is important to pay attention to symptoms, especially recurring problems.

"They could have chronic bronchitis, or if they get repeated pneumonia several times, shortness of breath, wheezing, cough, any of those symptoms, the patient should check with their physician (or provider) and maybe the physician can find out what's going on."

Loss of appetite, unexpected weight loss, hoarseness and even fatigue can also be signs something should be checked out.

Fear and a concern about financial cost can sometimes prevent people from taking action. Emmons urges anyone with issues to contact their provider or at the very least, [take an online assessment](#) on the OSF HealthCare website. If it indicates you might need a low dose CT scan, you will receive an email with additional information.

Emmons says OSF navigators are ready to help with next steps. Cost should not prevent anyone from getting a CT scan because Emmons says support is available.

"We do have financial navigators who will help you through that process – check with insurance to see if insurance is going to cover it. If it's self-pay, there are payment plans, just anything we can do to help ease that burden on you, because if you do meet the criteria (for a scan) you need to have it done."

Lastly, Emmons says there are also navigators who can continue to provide support for appointment scheduling and who will be with the patient if treatment is necessary. Advancements include [targeted radiation](#) that allows treatment over a shorter period.

She stresses there is also help for those who want to stop smoking.

"If you need any kind of resources, please check with your primary care provider. We have several resources on how to help you quit smoking."

[That support](#) can include nicotine replacement, medication assistance and behavioral modification therapy. Emmons adds, it can be hard and might take several tries, but it is worth the effort to lower a person's risk of getting lung cancer