

Lung cancer is the leading cause of death by cancer in the state of New Jersey

BY DELANEY CRAWFORD

Editor

In 2022, the American Cancer Society estimates about 236,740 new cases of lung cancer will be found in the United States, resulting in over 130,180 deaths.

While lung cancer mainly develops in older people, there are some preventable steps young people can take to reduce their risk of getting the disease.

Since November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month and Atlantic County has such a high percentage of people dealing with it, this seems like the perfect time to let our community know some of the important facts about this deadly disease.

Dr. John Wilson, a Penn Medicine radiation oncologist who cares for patients at Shore Medical Center, spoke on all things lung cancer.

John Wilson, M.D.

Penn Medicine radiation oncologist at Shore Medical Center

Q: Why do you think Atlantic County has such a high percentage of people with lung cancer?

A: It's hard to say. The New Jersey Department State Health Assessment Data website lists lung and bronchus cancer incidence for males only for 2014-2018 (I don't see females listed or more recent results) as 69.9/100K males, versus a state average of 59.5, and no U.S. data available. However, this is an age-adjusted rate, which would not support an argument that this county is a little older (39.9 years average per Atlantic County website, versus 38.1 years per US Census Bureau). Also the smoking rate per US News and World Report 2022 report on healthiest communities reports a lower smoking rate of 17.8% in Atlantic County versus a national median of 20%. However, smoking leading to lung cancer usually has a long latency period, so it would be interesting to see what the rate of smoking was say 20 or 30 years ago, which is harder to access.

This also raises the question about whether there is higher environmental exposures to non-smokers, such as casino workers being exposed to secondhand smoke. According to the Atlantic County Radon page, the average indoor radon level in Atlantic County is 1.4 pCi/L, just slightly above the national level of 1.3 pCi/L, and I don't suspect this slight increase would be a substantial part of the high incidence. According to the 2022 Healthy Community planning report from the New Jersey Departments of Health and Environmental Protection, our air quality is much better than the rest of the state, with the cancer risk due to the quality of air in Atlantic County estimated at 76 per million, much lower than the state risk of 155 per million.

Q: What are the top causes of lung cancer?

A: According to the New Jersey State Health Assessment Date website, cigarette smoking is believed to be responsible for almost 90% of all lung cancer cases, and other causes include secondhand smoke, radon exposure, radiation treatments, certain occupational exposures and air pollution especially from burning fossil fuels.



Q: How do you treat lung cancer?

A: All stages of lung cancer can be treated with radiation or chemotherapy, whether curatively or palliatively. Surgery is typically an option reserved for stages I-IIIa disease. Immunotherapy is typically used for stage III disease after chemoradiation, or stage IV (metastatic) disease.

Q: What are some ways to prevent lung cancer that you give to patients?

A: Smoking cessation by far is the most important for those still smoking, or for those who don't smoke, avoiding secondhand smoke. Although screening chest CTs for those eligible (50 to 80 years old, at least 20 pack year history, smoked within last 15 years) will not prevent lung cancer, they can detect earlier at a much more curable stage.

Q: How often do you treat lung cancer patients from Atlantic County?

A: We usually treat lung cancer patients every day at our center.

Q: What is a common misconception about lung cancer?

A: Common misconceptions about lung cancers are that they are all smoking related, or they are all incurable, so why bother with lung cancer screening. Another misconception is that smoking cessation counseling isn't helpful, you just have to "decide" to quit.

Q: What would you say is the most important thing to do when one has this illness?

A: Seek medical attention and find health care providers who you are comfortable with, who follow national guidelines such as NCCN (national comprehensive cancer network) and who listen to your concerns and needs.