

Why is Lung Cancer Screening Crucial?

Q&A WITH JEFFREY VELOTTA, MD, FACS



Q. What is the importance of lung cancer screening?

Early detection is key to saving lives. Studies show that screening reduces lung cancer mortality by greater than 20%.

Q. Who should be screened for lung cancer?

Adults should be screened if they are aged 50 to 80 years and have a greater than 20 pack year smoking history and currently smoke or have quit smoking within the past 15 years.¹

Q. What does lung cancer screening entail?

Screening is quick and pain free. It consists of a low-dose chest CT scan without intravenous contrast. The actual CT scan takes about 90 seconds and has a very low risk of radiation. A CT scan is the best way to detect early signs, so it's important to ensure that your lung screening consists of a CT scan and not an X-ray.

Q. What are the current barriers to lung cancer screening?

Screening requirements are a huge barrier because approximately 40% of providers are unaware of the exact criteria, which impacts the awareness of patients. Many patients are unfamiliar with what a "pack year" is or the exact time they quit smoking. These roadblocks make it difficult to gauge eligibility.

There is also a stigma surrounding smokers, so they tend to underreport their history to their health care providers.

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Q. How can providers advocate for early lung cancer screening?

Providers should become more familiar with screening requirements and encourage their patients to be more forthcoming about their smoking history. Asking tailored and specific questions makes all the difference.

There should also be more collaboration between initial touchpoints, like primary care, emergency departments and specialists like pulmonologists and thoracic surgeons.

Q. What role can policymakers play to ensure lung cancer screening?

Lung cancer is the least funded cancer because it's often stigmatized as self-imposed. However, policymakers can change that stigma and provide more public funding for awareness and possibly even mobile screenings to rural settings. At the health plan level, decisionmakers can also expand eligibility for lung cancer screenings so more people can access lifesaving screenings.



Providers should ask tailored and specific questions about patients' smoking history.

1. U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Lung cancer: Screening. U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Published March 9, 2021. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/recommendation/lung-cancer-screening>

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