

Women and lung cancer

What you need to know whether or not you smoke

BY ANDREA MARKOWITZ

Women's lung cancer death rates have been rising since 1987, according to the American Cancer Society's 'Cancer Facts & Figures 2010' (cancer.org). During the same period, men's deaths from lung cancer have declined.

The medical community cites two major reasons for these trends: an increase in the number of women who smoke and female genetics.

"The trend in increased women smokers comes from increased marketing of cigarettes to women in the 1960s, 70s and 80s," said Glen J. Weiss, M.D., director of thoracic oncology at the Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center Clinical Trials Program, Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center at Scottsdale Healthcare. "The time period from starting smoking to developing lung cancer can be 20 to 40 years."

While most lung cancer cases are smoking-related, cases of non-smoking-related lung cancer are growing too, especially in women.

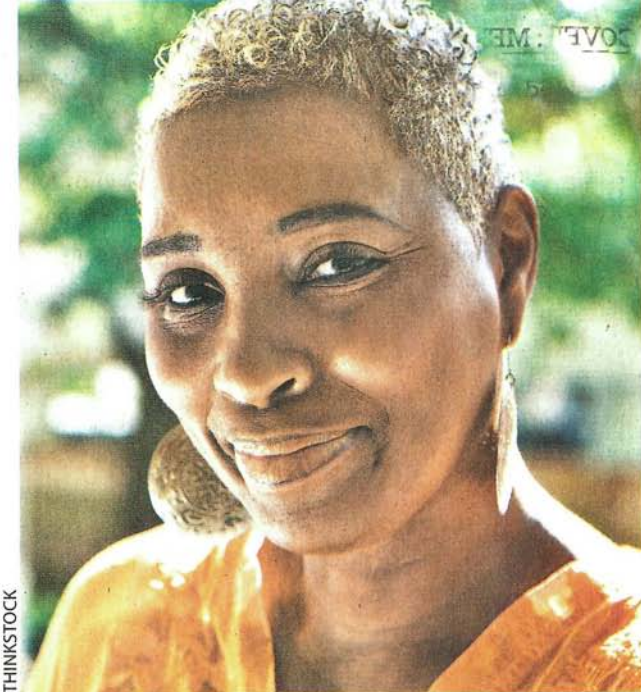
In fact, according to the Women's Lung Cancer Forum (womenslungcancer.org), twice as many women who never smoked develop lung cancer as compared to men who never smoked.

A new phenomenon

"This is a new phenomenon," said Michael Gotway, M.D., cardiac/thoracic imaging radiologist at Scottsdale Medical Imaging Ltd. "It appears to be related to genetics."

"Women with lung cancer tend to have a higher rate of mutation in their tumor in a gene known as EGFR," Weiss said. "According to new published data, a difference in estrogen may explain higher frequency of EGFR mutations in women than men."

"Lung cancers that are unrelated to smoking tend not to produce symptoms until they have reached a late stage," Gotway said. "But the earlier you are diagnosed with either smoking-related or non-smoking-related lung cancer, the better your



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chance of survival or cure."

Promising research

Doctors generally rely on chest X-rays to screen for lung cancer in former and current smokers. But new studies suggest that thoracic (chest) computed tomography (CT) is superior to chest X-rays for the detection of all types of lung cancers, especially in the early stage of the disease.

"Currently, there's no good protocol for identifying nonsmokers who are at risk of developing lung cancer," Gotway said. "However, there are risk factors that should be discussed with your physician, including a family history of lung cancer as well as exposure to radiation or

secondhand smoke."

Dr. Weiss notes that there is a lot of promising research looking at genetic causes that may play a role in the development of cancer and at finding new drugs and therapies that target various cancers. "We're probably going to make more advances in the next 5 or ten years than in the past several decades."

MORE INFO

For information about clinical trials for lung cancer, contact the Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center Clinical Trials Program at 480-323-1339 or 877-273-3713 or visit clinicaltrials@shc.org.