CT LUNG CANCER SCREENING

Results of the National Lung Screening Trial suggest that smokers and former smokers might benefit from lung CT scan screening. Is that the case?

The result of the NLST is the first indication that any test can reduce deaths from lung cancer. The study involved more than 50,000 current and former heavy smokers — people who smoked the equivalent of a pack of cigarettes a day for 30 years — ages 55 to 74. Participants were randomized between low-dose spiral CT scan and chest X-ray at the start of the trial. They received annual screening tests for three years and then were followed for five years. The initial results of this trial revealed a reduction in lung cancer deaths with CT scan screening. The results showed 354 lung cancer deaths had occurred among those who had been screened with CT scan vs. 442 deaths among those who were screened with chest X-ray. That represents a 20.3 percent reduction with CT screening.

With some cancers, doctors encourage people to get regular screening. Will lung cancer be added to that list?

Currently, in most cases, screening for lung cancer is not recommended and not covered by Medicare or most insurance companies. However, the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), the American College of Chest Physicians, the American Society of Clinical Oncology and the American Cancer Society have recommended screening for high-risk individuals ages 55 to 74 who have smoked a pack or more of cigarettes a day for 30 years or more, and who are still smoking or who quit less than 15 years ago. The NCCN also recommends screening for those 50 and older who have smoked a pack a day or more of cigarettes for 20 years or longer and have one additional risk factor for lung cancer. This could include a history of exposure to radon or occupational exposure to certain chemicals.

Screening for breast, cervical and colon cancers has been shown to reduce a patient’s risk of dying of these diseases when compared with those who don’t get screened. Doctors recommend screening for these cancers because doing so has proved beneficial for a group of people in the study setting. It remains to be seen whether the NLST results regarding lung cancer will lead to changes in screening guidelines by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

Will lung CT scans help doctors diagnose lung cancer earlier?

Prior lung CT scan studies have shown that screening increases detection of early-stage cancer and the NLST results provide evidence that those diagnoses end up being more beneficial than harmful in that they reduce the likelihood of death.

Being diagnosed with lung cancer at an earlier stage does make it more likely that surgery — the best treatment for most types of lung cancer — can remove and cure the cancer.

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