

# Lung Cancer Can Strike Anyone – But Smokers At Greatest Risk

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The recent death of television news anchor Peter Jennings and Dana Reeve's diagnosis have put lung cancer in the national spotlight. This increased attention, cancer experts hope, will spur greater public awareness of the disease's causes and symptoms, leading to a reduction in lung cancer deaths.

Lung cancer is the deadliest form of cancer in the United States, and causes more deaths each year than colon, breast, and prostate cancer combined. This year alone, more than 163,000 people likely will die from lung cancer, according to the American Cancer Society.

Bruce Johnson, MD, director of the Lowe Center for Thoracic Oncology at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, says smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer. An estimated 80 percent of lung cancer cases in women and 90 percent in men are linked to smoking. Johnson is quick to point out, however, that many smokers try to quit, that tobacco is addictive, and that it is not productive to blame smokers who develop lung cancer. “People who smoke don't deserve to get lung cancer,” says Johnson.

Although smoking is by far the largest risk factor, lung cancer can also develop in non-smokers, as is the case with Reeve. “Twenty percent of women and ten percent of men who get lung cancer never smoked,” explains Johnson. He said environmental risk factors, such as exposure to second-hand smoke or certain industrial chemicals, can increase a person's risk of developing lung cancer. Genetics may also play a factor in some cases.

Lung cancer is typically most treatable when caught early, but detecting lung cancer in its earliest stages is difficult. There currently is not an effective screening test, such as mammography for breast cancer.

Symptoms of early stage lung cancer are easy to miss, and some, such as a persistent cough, may be confused as symptoms for a cold or the flu. As a result, only about 15 percent of lung cancers are diagnosed in its early stage.

Stressing that lung cancer shares many symptoms with other non-life-threatening diseases and conditions, Johnson encourages people, especially smokers, to see their physicians if they experience any of the following:

A cough that will not go away over several weeks. Smokers may see a change in the frequency or severity of an already persistent cough;

- Chest, shoulder, or back pain that doesn't go away and is made worse by deep breathing;
- Increased wheezing;
- Shortness of breath; or
- Bloody coughs.

While studies of new lung cancer treatments at Dana-Farber and elsewhere have shown promising results, preventing lung cancer is far better than any new treatment, says Johnson. “The best way to prevent lung cancer is to never start smoking. For the people who are smokers, they should quit, and those who already have stopped smoking, they should remain non-smokers.”

More information on lung cancer care and research is available on the Dana-Farber web site, [www.dana-farber.org/can/updates/lung.asp](http://www.dana-farber.org/can/updates/lung.asp) .

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute is a principal teaching affiliate of the Harvard Medical School and is among the leading cancer research and care centers in the United States. It is a founding member of the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center (DF/HCC), a designated comprehensive cancer center by the National Cancer Institute.

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