

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Lung Nodules

What is a lung nodule?

A lung nodule is also called a spot on your lung (pulmonary nodule). It is usually round or oval in shape. They are easy to find but can be hard to diagnose. Nodules are found in 1 out of every 4 chest CT scans. Most nodules (more than 90%) are benign and not cancerous. Benign or non-cancerous nodules can be caused by previous infections or old surgery scars.

Nodules need to be examined and watched closely because they might be a small cancer. Finding cancers early when they are small and curable, is the goal of a screening program. Almost eighty percent of people who have a small lung cancer (1 cm in size, about ½ inch) surgically removed live at least five years after the diagnosis and are considered cured. Unfortunately people with larger lung cancer have a lower survival rate. Early detection is the key to a better outcome.

What are the symptoms of a lung nodule?

Nearly 90% of all lung nodules are discovered by accident. Usually they are seen on a chest x-rays or a CT scan that was performed for other reasons. Symptoms are few if any, but may include those similar to a chest cold or a mild flu.

How is a lung nodule examined?

If a lung nodule is considered highly suspicious for lung cancer based on its size, shape and appearance on chest x-ray or CT scan as well as considering other risk factors such as your smoking history and family history of cancer, it will need to be biopsied to determine if it is cancerous. The biopsy is a simple procedure of getting a sample from the pulmonary nodule for microscopic exam. It can be done surgically, bronchoscopically and by placing a needle thru the chest wall under radiographic guidance.

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The bronchoscope approach is an outpatient procedure without any cutting, sutures or sticking needles thru the chest wall. After heavy sedation and numbing of mouth and throat, the bronchoscope is inserted in your airways and is guided to the lung nodule. A sample is taken and immediately examined by a pathologist (a doctor who identifies diseases by studying cells and tissue under a microscope).

The pathologist will determine if the nodule is cancerous or benign. If it is benign or not cancerous, your doctor will ask you to come back in the future to re-examine the spot with another X-ray. Your doctor will watch the nodule for any changes and catch it early if it becomes cancerous. If the nodule is cancerous, a few more samples will be taken or other tests performed to determine if the cancer has spread. The next steps will be discussed.

How are lung nodules treated?

Benign or non-cancerous lung nodules do not need treatment. Lung cancer, if localized is usually removed surgically. If part of the cancer has spread to other parts of the body, you may need radiation and/or chemotherapy with or without surgery.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information about lung nodules or need to see one of our lung specialists, please call the Lung Line at 1-800-222-LUNG.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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