

## Pulmonary Health after Cancer Treatment

The lungs are very important organs that supply oxygen to the body. Sometimes, treatments given for childhood cancer can cause lung damage. If you received any treatments that may cause lung problems, it is important to learn about the lungs, and what you can do to keep them as healthy as possible.

### How the lungs function

The lungs transfer oxygen from the air to the blood, where it is circulated to the body tissues. The lungs also remove carbon dioxide, a waste product made by the body's cells. For oxygen to reach the blood, it must move through tiny air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs and into tiny blood vessels (capillaries) that surround each air sac. When the air sacs become damaged or scarred, there is less area for oxygen to enter the bloodstream, and less oxygen reaches the blood. The person may then need to breathe faster in order to get enough oxygen. This can make the person feel short of breath. Other lung problems can be caused by inflammation (swelling) of the air passages in the lungs or increased mucous production as a result of irritation or infection. Symptoms can include cough, wheezing, chest pain, and shortness of breath.

### Am I at risk for lung problems?

If you received any of the following treatments during your cancer therapy, you may be at risk for developing lung problems:

- Bleomycin (See the "[Bleomycin Alert](#)" Health Link for more information)
- Carmustine (also known as BCNU)
- Lomustine (also known as CCNU)
- Busulfan
- Radiation to the chest or axilla (underarm area)
- Total body irradiation (TBI)
- Surgery involving the chest or lung (this does NOT include surgery for placement of a central line, such as a Hickman, Broviac, Port-a-Cath or Mediport)
- Chronic graft-versus-host disease (cGVHD) following bone marrow transplant or stem cell transplant from a donor other than yourself (allogeneic transplant)
- Certain chemotherapy drugs known as anthracyclines, such as daunorubicin (Daunomycin®), doxorubicin (Adriamycin®), Mitoxantrone (Novantrone®), idarubicin (Idamycin®) and epirubicin can damage the heart and may contribute to lung problems, especially if given in combination with bleomycin, BCNU, CCNU, and radiation treatment.

Other factors that may increase your risk are:

- Younger age at the time of cancer treatment
- A history of lung infections, asthma or other lung problems
- Tobacco use or exposure to secondhand smoke
- Inhaled drugs, such as smoking marijuana, vaping, or cocaine

### What problems can develop?

Problems can include scarring of the lungs (pulmonary fibrosis), repeated lung infections (such as chronic bronchitis, bronchiectasis, or recurrent pneumonia), inflammation of the lung tissues and small airways within the lungs

(bronchiolitis obliterans), and rupture of the tiny air sacs in the lungs or thickening and blockage of air passages within the lungs (restrictive/obstructive lung disease).

## What are the symptoms of lung damage?

Symptoms may include shortness of breath, frequent coughing and/or wheezing, chest pain, and frequent lung infections, such as bronchitis or pneumonia. Becoming easily fatigued or short of breath during mild exercise (exercise intolerance) is sometimes an early symptom of lung damage. If you begin to experience these symptoms, discuss them with your healthcare provider. A consultation with a lung specialist (pulmonologist) may be recommended.

## What monitoring is recommended if I have no symptoms?

- A yearly medical check-up is recommended.
- Pulmonary function tests (including DLCO and spirometry) may show lung problems that are not apparent during a check-up. For this reason, it is helpful to have these tests done at least once (at least two years after completing cancer treatment) to find out if there are any problems. Your healthcare provider can decide if further testing is needed based on these results.

## Are there any special precautions I should take?

If you have had any of the treatments listed above you should:

- Get the pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine.
- Get yearly influenza (flu) vaccines.
- Avoid SCUBA diving, unless you have had a complete check-up and have been advised by a pulmonologist (lung specialist) that diving is safe.

## What can I do to prevent lung problems?

- Avoid or quite smoking.
- Avoid second-hand smoke.
- Get regular physical exercise.
- Avoid inhaled drugs, such as marijuana, vaping, or cocaine.
- Avoid breathing toxic fumes from chemicals, solvents, and paints.
- Follow all safety rules in your workplace, such as the use of protective ventilators in some work environments. Report any unsafe working conditions to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

## Where can a smoker find help in order to quit?

Your most important resources for quitting smoking are your family, friends and your healthcare provider. Listed below are some additional sources of education and support:

### Telephone Resources

If you don't have access to the Internet, you can call the following organizations to request educational materials (usually free) about how to quit smoking:

American Cancer Society: 1-800-ACS-2345

American Heart Association: 1-800-AHA-USA1

American Lung Association: 1-800-LUNG-USA

National Cancer Institute: 1-800-QUIT-NOW

## On-Line Resources

If you have access to the Internet, you may find the following websites helpful:

Information from the National Institutes of Health to help you quit smoking is available at: [www.smokefree.org](http://www.smokefree.org)

The Center for Disease Control's Tobacco Information and Prevention Source (TIPS) includes guides for quitting the tobacco habit and is available online at: [www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips)

The American Lung Association's free online "Stop Smoking" program is available online: [www.lung.org/stop-smoking/](http://www.lung.org/stop-smoking/)

## Where can I find more information about how to keep my lungs healthy?

More information about the lungs, and how to keep them healthy, is available at:

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's web site with general information for: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/)

The National Lung Health Education Program has information about how to keep lungs healthy: [www.nlhep.org](http://www.nlhep.org)

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**Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at**  
[www.survivorshipguidelines.org](http://www.survivorshipguidelines.org)

**Note:** Throughout this *Health Links* series, the term "childhood cancer" is used to designate pediatric cancers that may occur during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Health Links are designed to provide health information for survivors of pediatric cancer, regardless of whether the cancer occurred during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood.

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