5. Managing Lung Cancer Symptoms

Lung cancer can affect the surrounding lung tissue, causing symptoms such as coughing, bloodstained phlegm, breathlessness and chest pain. The cancer can also release substances that reduce appetite and cause weight loss with tiredness and, in some cases, insomnia. If the cancer has spread to other parts of the body, it can cause further problems such as abnormal lumps and pain. In general, the best way to improve lung cancer-related symptoms is to give treatment designed to treat or shrink the cancer.

Speak to your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you may be experiencing. In addition to cancer treatments, your doctor also may be able to help treat the cancer symptoms.

Managing pain

There is a range of prescription medications and alternative therapies available to manage the pain associated with lung cancer. Treatment depends on the cause of the pain, but relief is still available even if the cause of the pain is unknown.

Treatments include the different methods used to treat cancer such as surgery or chemotherapy; medications and other medical treatments specifically for pain; and a range of non-medication methods e.g. physiotherapy.

Many people find a combination of treatments helps, but everyone is different, so it might take time to find the right pain relief for you. If you’re having treatment in hospital – e.g. chemotherapy or radiotherapy – it can take a few weeks for you to feel the effects, so you will usually be given a form of pain medication as well.

Sometimes it is not possible to completely control all pain. You may still feel some discomfort. However, your health professionals can help make you feel as comfortable as possible.

Managing sleep issues

Fatigue (lack of energy)

Fatigue includes feeling exhausted, tired, sleepy, drowsy, confused or impatient. Fatigue can appear suddenly and may not be relieved by rest. Some suggestions on how to manage fatigue are listed below:

- Let people help you. Family, friends and neighbours may offer practical help with tasks such as shopping, childcare, housework and driving.
- Take a few weeks off work during and/or after having treatment, or work fewer hours. You may be able to work at home.
- Do light exercise, such as walking, and keep up your normal exercise routine if approved by your doctor. Don’t start any new exercise regimens until you have fully recovered from treatment.
- Try to eat a healthy, well balanced diet and don’tskip meals. If you have nausea, be flexible about your meals.

Insomnia (sleeping difficulties)

Some lung cancer patients experience sleeping difficulties which result in a poor or unsatisfactory sleep. You may experience this as difficulty falling asleep, repeated or lengthy awakenings, inadequate total sleep time, or poor quality of sleep that can affect your normal daytime functioning.

Some suggestions on how to manage insomnia are:

- unless very unwell, maintain a regular wake up time;
5. Managing Lung Cancer Symptoms

- maintain a regular time to go to bed;
- get adequate exposure to bright light during the day;
- create a quiet, dark and restful environment for sleeping;
- be careful with caffeine – caffeinated drinks like tea, coffee and soft drink may boost your energy and mental alertness but make you feel jittery, irritable, anxious and can cause insomnia;
- if you’re not sleeping well, tell your health care team – don’t take any pills or medication unless they are prescribed as they may react badly with your treatment.

Managing nausea and loss of weight

Nausea and loss of weight can be a symptom of lung cancer. Even if you do not feel sick (nauseous) you may not feel hungry or enjoy foods that you used to like. Some tips on managing nausea and loss of appetite can be found on page 34.

If you are underweight or losing weight you will need to include more protein and more energy in your diet. This may involve eating foods that are high in fat and sugar. Including extra fat and sugar in your diet will be for a relatively short period of time.

Good sources of protein and energy include: meat, fish, poultry, milk and dairy products, eggs, legumes (e.g. baked beans, kidney beans, chick peas, lentils) and nuts. For extra protein: aim to include meat, fish or poultry at least once a day, and preferably more.

It is important to speak to your doctor, nurse or dietitian if you experience unwanted weight loss as they will be able to provide advice on a suitable eating plan for you.

Managing cough

Cough is a common symptom of lung cancer which can be distressing if persistent.

Usually the best way to treat cough is to treat the lung cancer. If it is not possible to remove the cancer with an operation then using chemotherapy or radiotherapy to try and shrink the cancer can help to reduce cough. If the cough is associated with coughing up blood then sometimes a bronchoscopy will be recommended to locate the source of the bleeding and see if a local treatment such as laser can help you.

Medication

Your doctor may prescribe medication to help with breathlessness associated with lung cancer. These may treat pneumonia, wheezing, fluid build-up in the lungs or anxiety.

Breathing exercises

There are also relaxation exercises you can do to help manage breathlessness. A member of your medical team will teach you and your family exercises and techniques to do, so that you can practice them at home. They may also provide you with a take-home pamphlet outlining the exercises and techniques so that you can refer back to the exercise instructions if you find yourself in a difficult or stressful situation.

Managing breathing difficulties

Managing breathlessness associated with lung cancer will depend on the cause of your breathlessness. There are several options to help alleviate your discomfort. Initially, your doctor may do some tests to measure your breathing, including measuring how much oxygen is making it into your bloodstream.
5. Managing Lung Cancer Symptoms

Medications in the codeine and morphine family can also be very helpful to reduce cough. They may be given as slow release tablets for 24 hour coverage or in a short-acting liquid form to take as a ‘top-up’ at times of sudden troublesome cough. Sometimes steam inhalations or saline given as a fine spray through a nebuliser are also helpful.

If you are coughing up green or dark yellow phlegm (sputum), you may have an infection and need to see your doctor about antibiotics. Your doctor can also assess to see if other non-cancer issues such as asthma, reflux, heart failure or certain medications could be contributing to your cough.

Other

Your doctor may recommend further treatment options to alleviate your breathing difficulties. These could include:

- chemotherapy or radiation to shrink a tumour (see Chapter 6);
- thoracentesis – if your shortness of breath is caused by a build-up of fluid in the lung lining (see Chapter 6); and
- oxygen therapy (in hospital and/or at home).

Chapter Summary

- You can experience a range of symptoms caused by lung cancer, from pain and breathing difficulties to weight loss and sleeping issues.
- Your specialist can prescribe medication to treat pain associated with lung cancer.
- Help manage your fatigue with the help of family and friends as well as through exercise and diet.
- If you are underweight or losing weight you will need to include more protein and energy in your diet. Your doctor, nurse or dietician can provide advice on a suitable eating plan for you.
- Manage insomnia through changes to your diet, environment and routine as well as medication.
- Your doctor will look to help you with any breathing difficulties through medication and/or breathing exercises.
- Your doctor can recommend a number of treatment options for cough. See your doctor if you are coughing up dark yellow or green phlegm as this may indicate infection requiring antibiotics.