



The Client with Lung Cancer: Care and Support

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Identify two types of lung cancer, symptoms and common treatment.
2. Identify common needs of the client with lung cancer.
3. Discuss care that helps to promote the client's health and comfort.

Cancer is a group of diseases caused by the abnormal growth and spread of body cells. It can affect just about any organ or tissue in the body, and may spread to many other body sites. One of the most common sites for cancer to develop is the lung.

According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the US. NCI estimates that, for 2017, 222,500 new cases were diagnosed, and close to 160,000 deaths occurred due to lung cancer. This accounts for about 26% of all cancer deaths in the US.

This newsletter will discuss lung cancer, including causes, signs and symptoms, diagnosis and treatment. The role of the home health aide in providing care for clients with lung cancer will also be covered.

Lung Cancer Overview

Like any cancer, lung cancer begins with the abnormal growth and development of cells. These abnormal cells tend to grow very rapidly. They can invade nearby tissue, causing serious damage to affected organs. The cells can also be carried to other areas of the body by the lymphatic system or blood stream. This process is called metastasis, and allows the abnormal cells to invade organs or tissues far away from the first, or primary, site.



Cells are most likely to become abnormal when damaged. This is why skin cancer is associated with skin damage due to sun exposure, and why lung cancer is associated with

smoking. Cancer can also occur as the result of genetic influences causing abnormal cell growth.

Smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer, causing an estimated 90% of cases. Persons at highest risk of lung cancer include those aged 55 and older who currently smoke or who have smoked in the past. Non-smokers can also develop lung cancer, with the most common causes for them being genetic factors and exposure to second-hand smoke, asbestos, radon or other toxins.



Lung cancer is grouped into two main types, small cell and non-small cell cancer. Small cell lung cancer is the more aggressive type. It tends to spread quickly, and has the lowest survival rate. Non-small cell cancer is the more common type, accounting for up to 90% of lung cancers. Both types can spread, most commonly metastasizing to the bone, liver, brain and/or other lung.

Symptoms of lung cancer include worsening cough, chest pain, shortness of breath and coughing up blood. Weight loss and fatigue are also common.

Diagnosis & Treatment

A variety of tests can be used to diagnose lung cancer. Because the overgrowth of cells results in a tumor, this can often be visualized on imaging tests, such as a chest X-ray or CT scan. Other tests may include a sputum specimen to check for cancer cells or a biopsy, in which a needle is inserted to withdraw lung tissue or fluid for examination.

Treatment of lung cancer is challenging, and does not cure most persons. Only about 18% of persons survive five years or more after diagnosis. Treatment may include surgery to remove the tumor and affected lung tissue, as well as radiation, chemotherapy, or laser therapy.

Care and Support

The client with lung cancer has many needs, including physical, emotional and psychosocial. Care is focused on:

Promoting Nutrition: The body needs calories and high-quality nutrients, especially protein, to help repair cells damaged by cancer or its treatment methods. Unfortunately, these clients often suffer effects that interfere with good nutrition, such as nausea, vomiting, altered taste/smell, and mouth sores. As a result, weight loss is common. Many clients find it easier to eat small meals frequently throughout the day, rather than three larger ones. Soft, cool, foods that are bland and easy to swallow are often preferred, such as pudding or gelatin. A liquid supplement, such as Ensure, may be used to provide additional nutrients and calories.

Allow plenty of time for the client to eat slowly, and offer assistance as needed. Document the amount eaten at meals, and let the nurse know if your client's intake appears low. Encourage snacking throughout the day by offering milkshakes, pudding or other foods that the client enjoys.

Improving Oxygenation: Clients with lung cancer commonly experience shortness of breath and poor oxygenation. These clients are usually most comfortable with the head elevated. Avoid laying them flat if this causes shortness of breath. If oxygen is in use, make sure that it stays at the prescribed amount. Always observe oxygen safety precautions, ensuring that no one smokes or has open flames nearby. Make sure a sign is posted at the door warning that oxygen is in use. Frequent mouth care is needed, every 2 hours, since oxygen therapy can be very drying.



As you work with these clients, watch carefully for signs that they are not getting enough oxygen, especially when moving around or exerting themselves. These signs may include increased respiratory rate (over 24/min), increased pulse rate (over 100/min.), labored breathing, and pale or bluish skin color. Also watch for and report signs of respiratory infection, such as increased congestion and mucous production, fever, or chest pain.

Preserving Energy: Fatigue is common in clients with lung cancer, due to poor oxygenation, medical treatments, and the disease process. Because energy

is in such short supply, clients with lung cancer must learn to pace themselves where activity is concerned. You can help by spacing out activities during the day, allowing for periods of rest. Activities should be prioritized based on the client's needs. For example, getting good nutrition by eating breakfast is more important than having a bath in the morning. If the client is too fatigued to do both, the meal should take priority, and bathing can be delayed until the client has rested.

Promoting Hygiene: Regular bathing and oral care promotes healthy tissues and the client's self-esteem. The client's skin is often sensitive, so use mild cleanser and a gentle touch when bathing. Do not wash off any markings on the skin made for radiation therapy, and do not rub this area with a washcloth. Use clear water only... do not apply soap, powder, or lotion to the area unless directed by the nurse or physician. Mouth care is very important to remove irritating food particles and helps to prevent fungal infection. Sore, bleeding gums are a common side effect of cancer treatment, so be very gentle. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush or foam swab to thoroughly clean the mouth. If regular toothpaste is too irritating, use plain water or a saline solution recommended by the nurse or doctor.



Preventing Infection: Clients with lung cancer are often at increased risk for infection, due to their illness and/or treatment. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly while working with the client. The client should not be exposed to crowds or persons with illnesses, such as colds or flu. Watch for and report any signs of infection, such as areas of redness or warmth, fever, cough, cloudy urine, or painful urination.

Supporting Coping: Coping with a life-threatening illness is very challenging for the client and family members. You can help by being a good listener. Let the client or family member talk freely about their feelings, which commonly include anxiety, fear, anger, numbness, or despair. Avoid feeling that you should "fix" anything or offer advice. This is a very complex issue, and many times, there are no answers. Let them know you have heard them, with statements that reflect what they have said, such as, "It sounds like you're worried about what the future holds." Of course, avoid patronizing and possibly untrue comments, such as "Everything will be OK." Let the nurse know if the client seems depressed or anxious, since treatment may be needed.

Clients with lung cancer and their families face many physical and emotional challenges. Your compassionate and knowledgeable care can promote effective coping and improved quality of life.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Which of the following is most characteristic of any type of cancer?
- A. there is no effective treatment or cure
 - B. there is abnormal cell growth
 - C. the central nervous system is affected first
 - D. there are rarely any signs of the illness until it is advanced
- _____ 2. Lung cancer causes the most cancer deaths in the US.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 3. The majority of cases of lung cancer are caused by:
- A. genetic factors
 - B. exposure to asbestos
 - C. smoking
 - D. unknown factors
- _____ 4. Compared to non-small cell lung cancer, small cell lung cancer is:
- A. more aggressive
 - B. more common
 - C. more easily treated
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 5. Which of the following is NOT a common symptom of lung cancer?
- A. coughing up blood
 - B. chest pain
 - C. fatigue
 - D. weight gain

- _____ 6. Treatment allows the majority of people with lung cancer to survive five years or longer after diagnosis.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 7. Mr. Taylor is a 72 year old client with lung cancer. He suffers from nausea and mouth sores. Which of the following foods is he most likely to tolerate well?
- A. orange juice
 - B. tacos with Spanish rice
 - C. spaghetti with tomato sauce
 - D. vanilla custard with pears
- _____ 8. As the home health aide bathes Mr. Taylor, she sees several marks on his skin that indicate a site for radiation therapy. The home health aide should:
- A. place plastic wrap over the area so it doesn't get wet
 - B. wash this area well with soap and water
 - C. pour warm, clear water over the area to clean it
 - D. apply lotion generously to the area after the bath
- _____ 9. Mr. Taylor is very short of breath, due to his lung cancer. To make Mr. Taylor more comfortable, the home health aide positions him:
- A. with his head elevated
 - B. on his abdomen
 - C. on his right side
 - D. lying flat on his back
- _____ 10. Mr. Taylor says, "I'm so angry about having this awful disease, I could punch a wall." The home health aide's best response is:
- A. "Don't be angry, it just gets you upset, and you can't do anything about it."
 - B. "I know how you feel, I hate it when bad things happen."
 - C. "Your treatments are going well, so everything should be fine."
 - D. "It sounds like this is really tough to cope with."

