

Lung Cancer Screening for Smokers now approved & covered by Medicare

If you wish to schedule a screening test, please call the Yankton Medical Clinic at 605-665-7841 and ask to schedule a lung cancer screening CT.

Written by Board Certified Pulmonologist
Michael Pietila, MD, FCCP, FACP



As a result of a multi-centered, nationwide study of more than 53,000 smokers, current and former heavy smokers are now being advised to receive annual, low-dose CT screening for lung cancer.

On the basis of this recommendation, Medicare is now covering low-dose CT imaging as a screening test for lung cancer in former or current smokers who are at the highest risk for lung cancer.

It is well understood that cigarette smoking is by far the most significant

risk factor for developing lung cancer. The deadliest of cancers, lung cancer kills more men and women than the next 4 cancers – breast, prostate, colon, and pancreatic – combined. Part of the danger is that, until now, there has been no way to check for lung cancer.

Screening tests perform best and are most cost-effective when completed on patients at the highest risk for developing a disease. But who should undergo these screenings? And how is the determination made? Lung cancer is very rare in nonsmokers and young people, and much more common in heavy smokers as they get older. Therefore, this screening study included only those patients at the greatest risk. CT screening for lung cancer is NOT for all current or previous smokers.

The guidelines recommend that current and former smokers ages 55 – 78 who have at least a 30-pack-year smoking history, and are either still smoking or have only quit within the past 15 years, be offered low-dose CT screening on an annual basis.

Pack-years is a description used to quantify the number of cigarettes used in a smoker's lifetime. Most smokers

measure their use based on packs per day. This description considers one pack of cigarettes smoked per day for 30 years equal to 30 pack-years. Two packs per day for 15 years would also equal 30 pack-years. So, to calculate pack-years, smokers can multiply:

A = the number of years smoked X

B = the number of packs smoked per

day. Current guidelines do not apply to patients younger than 55 or older than 78, or those who quit smoking greater than 15 years ago or who were not heavy smokers.

So, when screening for lung cancer is offered to this specific group of at-risk people, how effective is it? The study demonstrated that CT screening prevented 80 deaths from lung cancer over 6 years, representing a 20% reduction in death due to screening.

CT SCREENING FOR LUNG CANCER SAVES LIVES!

Screening for lung cancer, just like any screening test, is not simple and can be complicated by false positives, unnecessary procedures, and additional



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testing that may lead to injury and increased cost.

If you wish to schedule a screening test, please call the Yankton Medical Clinic at 605-665-7841 and ask to schedule a lung cancer screening CT. After the CT is scheduled and completed, it will be read by our radiologist Dr. Eidsness. Results will be made available to you in a timely fashion, often immediately after the scan. If an abnormal result is found, an appointment with Dr. Michael Pietila or Dr. Lori Hansen can be arranged, often on the same day or even the same appointment. At this appointment, options for appropriate treatment will be discussed. If the scan is negative, another

scan can be arranged for one year later. You may not even be required to have a follow-up appointment.

If you are a current or former smoker who fits the criteria outlined above, and you want to reduce the chance that you might die from lung cancer, please consider calling the Yankton Medical Clinic to arrange for a scan. If you would like to discuss the role of CT screening in your individual case, appointments in our pulmonary division are available with Dr. Michael Pietila or Dr. Lori Hansen by calling 605-665-1152. No referral is necessary.

The guidelines state that screening should only be completed in a facility where comprehensive care by lung cancer specialists is offered.

The Yankton Medical Clinic, P.C. is the only facility in this region that can satisfy this recommendation.

Patients age 55-78 who are currently smoking or quit within 15 years and have at least a 30-pack-year history of smoking are encouraged to pursue lung cancer screening.

For more information or to schedule an appointment please call 605-665-1152.