

General Information About Small Cell Lung Cancer

There are three types of small cell lung cancer.

These three types include many different types of [cells](#). The cancer cells of each type grow and spread in different ways. The types of small cell lung cancer are named for the kinds of cells found in the cancer and how the cells look when viewed under a microscope:

- Small cell carcinoma ([oat cell cancer](#)).
- Mixed small cell/[large cell carcinoma](#).
- Combined small cell carcinoma.

Smoking tobacco is the major risk factor for developing small cell lung cancer.

Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of lung cancer. [Risk factors](#) for small cell lung cancer include:

- Smoking cigarettes, cigars, or pipes now or in the past.
- Being exposed to second hand smoke.
- Being exposed to [asbestos](#) or [radon](#).

Possible signs of small cell lung cancer include coughing, chest pain, and shortness of breath.

These and other [symptoms](#) may be caused by small cell lung cancer or by other conditions. A doctor should be consulted if any of the following problems occur:

- A cough that doesn't go away.
- Shortness of breath.
- Chest pain that doesn't go away.
- Wheezing.
- Coughing up [blood](#).
- Hoarseness.
- Swelling of the face and neck.
- Loss of appetite.
- Unexplained weight loss.
- Unusual tiredness.

Tests and procedures that examine the lungs are used to detect (find) and diagnose small cell lung cancer.

The following tests and procedures may be used:

- [Chest x-ray](#): An [x-ray](#) of the organs and bones inside the chest. An x-ray is a type of energy beam that can go through the body and onto film, making a picture of areas inside the body.
- [Physical exam and history](#): An exam of the body to check general signs of health, including checking for signs of disease, such as lumps or anything else that seems unusual. A history of the patient's health habits and past illnesses and treatments will also be taken.
- [Sputum cytology](#): A microscope is used to check for cancer cells in the sputum ([mucus](#) coughed up from the lungs).
- [Laboratory tests](#): Medical procedures that test samples of [tissue](#), blood, [urine](#), or other substances in the body. These tests help to [diagnose](#) disease, plan and check treatment, or monitor the disease over time.

- Bronchoscopy: A procedure to look inside the trachea and large airways in the lung for abnormal areas. A bronchoscope (a thin, lighted tube) is inserted through the nose or mouth into the trachea and lungs. Tissue samples may be taken for biopsy.
- Fine needle aspiration biopsy: The removal of part of a lump, suspicious tissue, or fluid, using a thin needle. A pathologist views the tissue or fluid under a microscope to look for cancer cells. This procedure is also called a needle biopsy.
- Thoracentesis: Removal of fluid from the pleural cavity (the space between the lungs and chest wall) through a needle inserted between the ribs.

Certain factors affect prognosis (chance of recovery) and treatment options.

The prognosis (chance of recovery) and treatment options depend on the following:

- The stage of the cancer (whether it is in the chest cavity only or has spread to other places in the body).
- The patient's gender and general health.
- The blood level of lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), a substance found in the blood that may indicate cancer when the level is higher than normal.

For most patients with small cell lung cancer, current treatments do not cure the cancer.

If lung cancer is found, participation in one of the many clinical trials being done to improve treatment should be considered. Clinical trials are taking place in most parts of the country for patients with all stages of small cell lung cancer.