

Screening for lung cancer with CT scans is no scam

By ACSH Staff — August 17, 2011

Findings ^[1] of a study sponsored by the National Cancer Institute last year showed that screening current and former smokers with spiral CT scans can reduce lung cancer deaths by 20 percent, compared to standard chest X-rays. The results were so striking that the study was actually halted early and hailed by the American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, and other prominent health organizations.

In response to the study, more hospitals have begun to offer discounted CT scans to smokers concerned about their risk for lung cancer, but some doctors are actually **criticizing** ^[2] the practice. For instance, Dr. H. Gilbert Welch, a researcher at the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice, believes that hospitals will promote only the benefits of CT scans while ignoring the associated costs and complications, which can include false positive results that lead to needless and invasive follow-up procedures.

Some hospitals, such as University Hospitals in Cleveland, are offering the typically \$1,000 scan for just \$99, which critics assert is an unfair tactic used to encourage patients to undergo a procedure they may not need. But as Dr. William Burfeind, a cardiothoracic surgeon at St. Luke's points out, these low-cost scans are an effective way to identify patients at earlier stages of lung cancer, which will increase their odds of a cure.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross agrees with Dr. Burfeind and believes that various expert medical organizations, such as the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, will recommend the spiral CT scan to current and ex-smokers in the near future. While the scan requires that 300 people get screened in order to save one life, this test can reduce lung cancer mortality by 20 percent, he observes. If a test with a clear rationale for such a benefit can't be endorsed, what test can?

Importantly, there are specific conditions that must be met by those who decide to have the CT scan. Only current or former smokers between the ages of 55 and 74 who have smoked on average a pack a day are eligible to get the scan and they must also have a prescription from their doctor.

For Dr. Ross, the choice is easy: If it were my patient or family member, I'd recommend that they get this test, since lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the U.S.; it kills about 157,000 people annually and places the remaining 94 million current or former smokers at an elevated risk of the disease.

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[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/04/AR2010110402853.html>

[2] <http://yourlife.usatoday.com/health/health/story/2011/08/Critics-slam-low-cost-CT-scans-for-smokers-as-marketing-ploy/50001436/1>