COPD and Lung Cancer Risk

by BRENDA VANTA

Is There a Connection Between COPD and Lung Cancer?

Does chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) increase your risk of developing lung cancer? Smokers are more likely to develop COPD, and smokers are also more likely to suffer from lung cancer — but scientists are now questioning whether COPD is an independent risk factor for lung cancer, without taking smoking habits into consideration.

The Research

A 2013 study featured in *The Journal of Thoracic Oncology* evaluated almost 12,000 patients diagnosed with lung cancer. They found the odds of lung cancer in patients with COPD (diagnosed with COPD within six months of their cancer diagnosis) were elevenfold compared with patients without COPD.

However, this ratio dramatically decreased when the researchers took in the account the patients' smoking habits. The conclusion was that a diagnosis of COPD is strongly associated with the development of lung cancer; however, this link is largely explained by smoking habits. Therefore, COPD is not an independent risk factor for lung cancer.

Preventing Lung Cancer

The study described above brings good news to COPD patients: simply put, if you stop smoking, you lower your chances of getting lung cancer. It’s never too late to quit smoking.

If you have COPD your lungs are already damaged, but quitting smoking can slow down how quickly the disease progresses. After 10 years of not smoking, your risk of dying from lung cancer is about half that of an individual who continued to smoke during that time.

Within five years of quitting smoking, studies show your risk of dying from all causes is reduced by 13 percent, and the risk of dying from heart diseases is reduced by 47 percent. You also reduce the risk of cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, and bladder by 50 percent.

20 years after quitting, for most causes of death the risk among former smokers is about the same as that of those who had never smoked, according to a 2008 study.

Having trouble quitting smoking? Trying to quit cold turkey may not be the best option — as many as 95 percent of people who opt for this strategy will usually start to smoke again.

Talk to your doctor to discuss the many options available, including nicotine replacement therapy (found to double the chances of successfully quitting smoking), drugs such as bupropion or varenicicline, as well as counseling.

Talk to your friends and family about your plans to quit smoking. Their encouragement will help you, and will keep you motivated.

You can also find a support group and share your thoughts with other people who try to quit.

Stay away from stress, because stress will make you more likely to restart your bad habits. Get a relaxing massage, listen to music, try meditation, deep breathing, yoga or tai chi.

Clean your house to get rid of the smell of cigarettes and work out regularly — it will help you reduce your nicotine cravings and withdrawal symptoms. In addition, it will help you burn some extra calories and prevent weight gain, which sometimes happen after quitting smoking.