



AFRICAN AMERICANS AND Lung Cancer

*Lung cancer. Two very dangerous words.
Lung cancer kills three times as many
men as prostate cancer and twice as many
women as breast cancer.*

According to the American Lung Association (ALA), there is a racial difference in the number of lung cancer occurrences. Despite similar smoking rates, African Americans – particularly African American men – are more likely to develop and die from lung cancer.

The ALA's report shows that African American men are 37 percent more likely to get lung cancer than white men and they are 22 percent more likely to die from it. So if the smoking rate is the same, why is there a difference in the rates of developing lung cancer?

Research suggests that while African Americans do not smoke more than their Caucasian counterparts, they are more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes. Menthol smokers tend to have higher levels of a nicotine byproduct in their blood called cotinine. This higher level of exposure causes higher levels of nicotine addiction in menthol smokers, making them less likely to quit smoking and more likely to relapse after quitting.

Smoking is not the only cause of lung cancer, however. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) studies show that, because of lower income levels, African Americans tend to live in more polluted communities with higher levels of toxins, such as diesel exhaust and benzene. In fact, African American neighborhoods face close to 1.5 times higher levels of air toxins, exposing residents to nearly 200 different cancer-causing air pollutants. The EPA has linked a 40 percent higher risk of developing lung cancer to people who are exposed to these kinds of toxins.

While it may not be possible to reduce your risk for lung cancer by moving your home, quitting smoking can definitely

help. Smokers are six times more at risk for lung cancer than non-smokers. The longer you go without smoking, the more your risk is lowered. Individuals who quit smoking more than 10 years ago are 58 percent less at risk than patients who have recently quit.

African Americans not only have a higher risk of developing lung cancer, but also a higher risk of dying from the disease. The Lung Cancer Alliance attributes the higher mortality rate to a lack of access to care. More African Americans below Medicare age are uninsured than whites. Uninsured patients are less likely to see a doctor.

Yet, when cancer is discovered in the early stages, the survival rate is much higher. Recent studies have shown that screening a high-risk population with CT scanners can yield a 10-year survival rate of 92 percent.

Statistics don't show African Americans have a survival rate anywhere near 92 percent though. In fact, the five-year survival rate for African American men is only 12 percent. Black men are often diagnosed later when the cancer is less treatable, they tend to see physicians who are not board certified, they wait longer to seek treatment and often refuse treatment, such as surgery or chemotherapy, altogether.

The American Cancer Society predicts an estimated 23,220 cases of lung cancer and 16,790 deaths among African Americans in 2011.

These numbers don't have to be so high. Take charge of your health. If you smoke, quit. Schedule regular checkups with your physician and keep your screening appointments. If we take care of ourselves, the racial disparities in lung cancer death rates can disappear in our lifetime.



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