Lung cancer: finding it early and lowering your risk

The signs to get checked, and simple steps to lower your risk

What is lung cancer?

Lung cancer starts when cells in the airways or lungs grow out of control. Early on it often causes no symptoms, so many people are diagnosed late. Found early, it is much more likely to be treated successfully, sometimes with the aim of a cure.

Signs to get checked

- A cough lasting 3 weeks or more, or a change in a cough you have had for years
- Getting more out of breath than usual doing everyday things
- Chest infections that keep coming back or will not clear up
- Feeling tired or weak all the time for no clear reason
- Coughing up blood, or phlegm that is streaked with blood or rusty
- Chest or shoulder pain, often worse when you breathe or cough
- Losing weight without trying, or going off your food
- A hoarse voice that will not settle, or wider, curved fingertips

Ways to lower your risk

Stop smoking

The biggest single step. It is never too late to stop and lower your risk

Get free help to quit

Quit Your Way Scotland 0800 84 84 84, your pharmacy, or ask us

Avoid other people's smoke

Keep your home and car smoke-free, for you and your family

Check your home for radon

A natural gas that builds up in some homes. Check at ukradon.org

Stay safe at work

Use the right mask and safety rules for asbestos, dust and fumes

Stay active and eat well

Move every day, eat plenty of fruit and veg and avoid smoky air

Who is more at risk

Smoking, now or in the past · **Age 50 and over** · **COPD or other lung disease** · **Lung cancer in a close relative** · **Asbestos, silica or fumes at work** · **Second-hand smoke** · **Radon or air pollution**

Smoking causes about 7 in 10 lung cancers, but people who have never smoked can get it too.

Please turn over for what you can do, what the doctor will do and when to get help

What you can do

Know your normal. Notice changes in your cough, breathing, weight or energy.

Do not wait it out. See a GP if a cough or other sign lasts 3 weeks.

Never ignore blood. Any blood when you cough needs an urgent check.

Tell us your history. Smoking, your jobs and family illness all help us.

Come back if it lasts. A clear scan does not always rule cancer out.

Say yes to screening. If you are invited for a lung check, please go.

What the doctor will do

1. Ask about your symptoms, smoking, work and family
2. Listen to your chest and check your neck and hands
3. Arrange chest imaging and blood tests if needed
4. Refer you urgently to a chest specialist if needed

Most people who are checked or referred do not have cancer. Getting checked early either puts your mind at rest or finds cancer when treatment works best.

Call 999 if you

- Are struggling to breathe, choking or cannot speak
- Have chest or upper back pain
- Cough up a lot of blood
- Have sudden swelling of your face or neck with breathlessness

Contact us the same day if

- You have coughed up any blood
- Your breathing is getting worse
- A chest infection is not better after antibiotics
- You notice a new lump above your collarbone

Lung screening

Screening uses a low-dose CT scan to look for lung cancer before it causes symptoms, in people at higher risk because of smoking. England invites people aged 55 to 74 who have ever smoked. Scotland does not yet have a national programme, but pilots are running and one is being planned. If you are invited, please take part.

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Contact us
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Out of hours
NHS 24: call 111
Support: roycastle.org

Based on the Scottish Referral Guidelines for Suspected Cancer (2025), NICE NG12 and NG122, CKS, NHS, BMJ Best Practice and the American Cancer Society. October 2026.