

Lung Cancer: Why the Guilt Trip?

Mark G. Kris, MD

Aug 12, 2013

84% of Lung Cancer Patients Are Nonsmokers

Hi. This is Mark Kris from Memorial Sloan-Kettering. I would like to follow up on a recent study about the guilt that many patients have after developing lung cancer.^[1] I would also like to say a few words about the current state of smoking and lung cancer, and how it is quite different from when I began my practice and the treatment of patients with this illness.

We surveyed a large group of over 2000 patients at our institution and carefully looked at self-reported smoking status. Only 16% of our patients today are current smokers. Put another way, 84% are nonsmokers. Never-smokers are those persons who have smoked fewer than 100 cigarettes in their lifetime. When defined that way, 27% of our patients said that they are never-smokers. The vast majority of patients, 57%, are so-called former smokers, and we include people who had stopped smoking at least a year ago. That is the vast majority of patients.

The quick answer is to say, "If we stop smoking, we will stop lung cancer." That is definitely true for the next generation, but it is not true for this generation. The vast majority of people who develop lung cancer today have heeded the health warnings and have stopped smoking, but they get lung cancer nonetheless. In some of the cohorts we have looked at, people had stopped smoking 10-20 years ago,^[2] so this idea that lung cancer is a problem from smoking, that stopping smoking today will change the face of lung cancer, is absolutely incorrect. We are going to be faced with an epidemic of lung cancer for a decade or more if every single person stops smoking today. Why is that? The damage caused by cigarette smoke has occurred long ago, and it does not resolve. The damage that leads to lung cancer does not resolve by stopping smoking. There ultimately is a time when the damage from smoking is such that the lung cancer will eventually develop. What that time is or how many cigarettes are required to do that is not known, giving us good rationale to say, "Don't smoke. Stop now. Smoke as few cigarettes as possible."

Why does smoking cessation help? It is not that smoking cessation allows the lung to heal. As I said before, the damage caused by the cigarette smoke that ultimately leads to cancer occurs and is in some ways fixed. The way that smoking cessation helps is that it limits the exposure to tobacco carcinogens that can lead to lung cancer. Yes, the lung looks normal and yes, it is healed by any kind of visual or gross pathologic observation. But the damage is still there. So, don't start smoking. Stop as soon as possible. Limit the amount of cigarette smoking. Those are the ways to cut down on lung cancer.

No Place for Blame

As for the guilt, please remember that the people who start smoking are generally 12 or 13 years old. I will leave it to you to decide whether that is a time when people make informed adult decisions. Clearly, that is not the case. These children are faced with billions of dollars of advertisements and promotion of cigarette smoking. Is it an informed choice that an adult would make? I would say no. I would say that the 12-year-olds that make the decision to start smoking are not in a position to make an informed choice. I would also say that by the time you are in a position to make a better choice, you are addicted to cigarette smoking, and it is an addiction that is very, very hard to lick. Should we blame

smokers? Absolutely not. They were targeted. They were up against forces that were far beyond their years, and most people who go on to develop lung cancer today have stopped smoking. So, blaming the smoker and saying that quitting smoking will solve lung cancer is not correct. We have to think of lung cancer the way we think of any other type of disease. The etiology is, of course, cigarette related, but the vast majority of people have stopped smoking, and we must take lung cancer seriously as a disease and deal with it.

Of course, tobacco cessation efforts are extremely important. There is so much to be gained by stopping smoking, not just for lung cancer but for a host of other diseases. But it is very important that people who have stopped smoking but develop lung cancer do not blame themselves, and that healthcare providers in particular and society in general do not blame them either. In many ways, they were victims. They have heeded the health warnings and stopped. Please remember that we as healthcare professionals need to do whatever we can to keep the next generation from smoking, but at the same time, we need to focus on efforts to cure the lung cancers that have developed in people who smoked in the past. They have made the good effort and stopped smoking, and we need to try to help them. There is no place for guilt here. We just have to fight this awful disease.

References

1. Schiller JH, Bowden CJ, Mills J, et al. Explicit and implicit attitudes toward lung cancer (LC) relative to breast cancer (BC). Program and abstracts of the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology; May 31-June 4, 2013; Chicago, Illinois. Abstract 8017.
2. Varghese AM, Sima CS, Chaff JE et al. Lungs don't forget: Comparison of the KRAS and EGFR mutation profile and survival of collegiate smokers and never smokers with advanced lung cancers. *J Thorac Oncol.* 2013;8:123-125. [Abstract](#)

Medscape Oncology © 2013 WebMD, LLC

Cite this article: Lung Cancer: Why the Guilt Trip? *Medscape.* Aug 12, 2013.