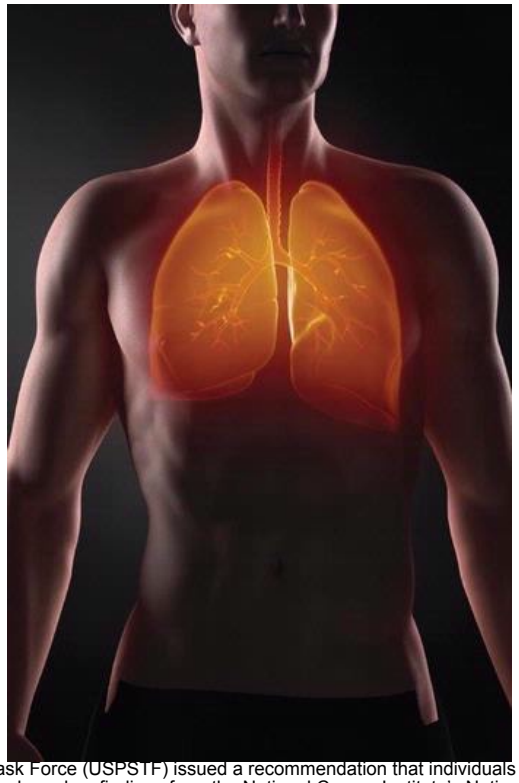
Eisenhower Medical Center - A National Leader in Lung Cancer Screening



In July 2013, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) issued a recommendation that individuals at high risk for lung cancer undergo annual screening using low-dose CT scans. This recommendation was based on findings from the National Cancer Institute's National Lung Screening Trial (NLST), published in 2012, showing that CT screening reduced lung cancer deaths among current and former heavy smokers by 20 percent when compared to standard chest X-rays.

"This study showed that CT screening could have an enormous impact on the disease," says Eisenhower Medical Oncologist Davood Vafai, MD, a nationally recognized lung cancer expert who, during his fellowship training, was involved in developing the chemotherapy protocol used to treat lung cancer today. "In oncology, we often see advances that produce only two or three percent reductions in mortality."

At Eisenhower Medical Center, however, Dr. Vafai and a team of other lung cancer experts already had been screening at-risk patients for a decade when the USPSTF's recommendation was issued.

Since 2003, Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center has participated in the International Early Lung Cancer Action Program (I-ELCAP), a worldwide research study evaluating the effectiveness of lung cancer screening with low-dose CT scans in current and former smokers. In addition, the Cancer Center is part of a related study for people who have never smoked but have been exposed to secondhand smoke at work or in the home. It's called the Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute (FAMRI) study.

To date, nearly 650 patients have been screened as part of these studies at Eisenhower. Among the 594 I-ELCAP participants — all current or former smokers — 24 have been diagnosed with lung cancer.

"This is a detection rate of about five percent, which is a little higher than other programs that see rates of three to four percent," says Stephanie Farrell, MBA, CPHQ, CCRC, Coordinator of Clinical Cancer Research at Eisenhower. "This could be because we have an older demographic here in the Valley, and age is the number one risk factor for any type of cancer."

Through participation in these studies, Eisenhower has acquired a depth of experience in lung cancer screening that few hospitals in the entire state can match.

And now, with the USPSTF's recommendation, the Cancer Center remains on the forefront as it expands its lung cancer screening from a purely research-based initiative to the clinical setting.

"Because of our 11-year participation in I-ELCAP, we are recognized by the Lung Cancer Alliance, a national advocacy group, as one of the most experienced screening centers in the country," says Farrell. "Experience matters because lung cancer screening is about much more than just getting a scan.

"Other facilities are just learning, and there's a real learning curve to reading and interpreting screening CT scans," echoes Dr. Vafai, noting that Eisenhower's radiologists have read thousands of lung scans as part of their 11-year participation in I-ELCAP. "Plus, we have a team in place that also includes pulmonologists, medical oncologists, thoracic surgeons, interventional pulmonologists, interventional radiologists and pathologists. We really are a center of excellence in terms of doing lung cancer screening."

"We have an infrastructure and process in place that provides comprehensive, coordinated care from screening to image interpretation, management of findings, and evaluation and treatment of potential cancers," Farrell adds.

She also points out that one of the biggest impacts of the USPSTF's recommendation is that it sets the stage for lung cancer screening to be covered by Medicare, something she believes will happen within the next year.

"Private insurers like Blue Cross, WellPoint and Anthem have already begun to cover it because they understand that if lung cancer can be caught early, it's less expensive to treat," explains Farrell, noting that early stage lung cancer can be treated by surgery alone, while later-stage cancers also require chemotherapy and radiation.

For people whose insurance does not cover the low-dose screening CT scan, Eisenhower is offering the scan at a greatly reduced price of $285.

"The cost of baseline screening in the FAMRI study for people who have never smoked, but have been exposed to secondhand smoke, is covered by grant funding," says Farrell. "And if something is found in anyone who is screened — either within or outside a research study — their insurance would cover the necessary care."

Importantly, Eisenhower will continue to participate in the I-ELCAP study, collecting data on the patients screened here and working with the study group to refine best practices, Farrell notes.

"By contributing to the growing bodyof research, we can help refine the USPSTF recommendation and further identify other groups who may benefit from screening and early detection," she says.

To learn if you qualify for CT lung cancer screening at Eisenhower Medical Center, call 760-674-3644.

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