

The Importance of Lung Cancer Screening

"Alright so today we're going to be taking some images of your lungs."-Technician

A low-dose computed tomography, or LDCT scan, is a test that takes detailed pictures of your lungs with X-rays to find lung cancer. Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in both men and women. This scan can help your provider find it early, when it's most treatable.

"With low dose scans, we can now detect cancer that would never have been detected in the past, and perhaps save your life."-Dr. Kirk Ohanian, MD, Radiologist

The test isn't for everyone, though. Getting screened if you're not actually at increased risk for lung cancer could do more harm than good. That's why the test is recommended only for those who are 55 to 80 years old; and who currently smoke or quit less than 15 years ago; and who smoked at least 30 pack years. That means smoking a pack a day for 30 years, 2 packs a day for 15 years, or 3 packs a day for 10 years. Even if you're a good candidate, it's important to weigh the pros and cons with your provider.

One downside is that the test may identify something that appears to be cancer but actually isn't. This is called a false-positive result, and it can lead to more tests and treatments you don't need. Also, a low-dose CT scan exposes you to a small amount of radiation. Repeated exposure to radiation can slightly increase your odds of getting cancer in the future.

"Even though it's low dose, it still has risk."- Dr. Kirk Ohanian, MD, Radiologist

Right before the test, you'll remove clothing from the waist up and change into an exam gown. You might also be asked to remove jewelry and other accessories that contain metal. Then you'll lie on your back on a table with your arms raised above your head. The table will slowly move through the round opening of the CT machine. You might hear a whirring sound as the machine spins. The CT will take X-ray pictures of your lungs. You may be asked to hold your breath for a few seconds, so the images don't get blurred.

"All right, that's it, you're all done."-Technician

The entire scan takes less than a minute. Your whole visit should be done within 30 minutes, and you can go home. Ask your provider about next steps—including any additional tests or follow-up visits you'll need. Whatever the results of your scan, use it as an opportunity to kick the habit if you smoke. Remember that it's never too late to quit.