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Web Exclusive: Other Cancers of the Lung

BY ELIZABETH WHITTINGTON

Although non-small cell lung cancer is by far the most common type of lung cancer, a handful of other primary cancers affect the delicate organ.

Sharing the title of “lung cancer,” small cell lung cancer makes up about 15 to 20 percent of lung cancers and is believed to be caused by smoking in the majority of cases, with other causes including secondhand smoke, radon, and asbestos. Small cell lung cancers, considered more aggressive than the non-small cell type, is staged as limited or extensive disease, and usually treated with chemotherapy and radiation. While complete remissions occur in up to 50 percent of patients treated with combined chemotherapy and radiation, relapses are common and overall survival is low.

While small cell lung cancer affects the airways, pleural mesothelioma, a disease diagnosed in about 3,000 Americans annually, is cancer of the tissues lining the lungs and chest. The disease is strongly linked to exposure to asbestos, a material commonly used in building construction before it was banned about 30 years ago. Asbestos can be inhaled as tiny fibers into the mesothelium and cause irritation in the lung’s lining over time. Because the disease can take three to five decades to develop after exposure to asbestos, some experts believe the incidence rate will actually increase in the coming years, peaking between 2010 and 2020. Prognosis is usually poor since most cases are diagnosed in advanced stages, but studies show treatment with Alimta[®] (pemetrexed) plus cisplatin can increase survival.

Carcinoid tumors are very slow growing and can occur in different parts of the body. Carcinoid lung tumors represent 1 to 6 percent of all lung cancers and make up about 10 percent of all carcinoid tumors. The disease is usually treated with surgery, and the 10-year survival rate is over 75 percent. Pulmonary non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, including mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue (MALT), is also rare and not well understood. It usually carries a good prognosis, with patients having an average 10-year survival of around 50 to 60 percent.