

WELLNESS CONNECTION

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EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT - Dr. Karriem Watson, a Public Health Researcher and Community Health Scientist, Answers some Common Questions Regarding Lung Cancer

By Seth Yoder

Dr. Karriem Watson is a public health researcher and community health scientist with the University of Illinois Cancer Center. He also serves as the director of the Office of Community Engaged Research and Implementation Science for the UI Cancer Center and the Mile Square Health Center, a group of Federally Qualified Health Clinics (FQHCs) affiliated with the University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System.

November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month, so Dr. Watson answered some common questions about the disease.

Q: Who is most at risk for lung cancer?

A: Based upon the leading causes of lung cancer, anyone who smokes or is exposed to second-hand smoke, radon gas, asbestos, and other carcinogens are at greatest risk to develop lung cancer. Current research has identified African American men to be one of the most at risk groups impacted by lung cancer. This largely has to do with limited access to screenings and education around preventative care. In addition to these factors, healthcare providers' limited knowledge on how to obtain the most useful patient information during screenings contributes to the poor health outcomes for this group.

Q: What are the leading causes of lung cancer?

A: Smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer; however, environmental exposure at work or at home can significantly contribute to the development of the disease. In particular, settings where exposure to radon gas, asbestos, and carcinogens such as coal products, chromium, and nickel, all put individuals at higher risk to develop lung cancer. Other causes include arsenic in drinking water, poor air quality, and family history. Recent research in the field of epigenetics has also revealed that external environmental factors, like the degree one is exposed to stressful situations, domestic violence, and social inequities, can lead to alterations in DNA sequences which contribute to lung cancer and other types of health ailments.

Q: What are the early signs of lung cancer?

A: Signs and symptoms of lung cancer often do not present themselves in the early stages of the disease. By the time symptoms of lung cancer typically occur the disease is already in an advanced stage. Contributing to the difficulty of identifying lung cancer is the fact that most of the signs and symptoms are not distinguishable from similar ailments. Some signs and symptoms could include shortness of breath, chest pain, a persistent cough, and sudden loss of weight. For the aforementioned reasons it is critical to follow lung cancer screening guidelines, particularly for people with a higher risk of getting lung cancer.

Q: What are some ways to prevent lung cancer?

A: The number one method to prevent lung cancer is to quit smoking. It is also important to seek a better understanding of why people smoke in the first place. Developing an understanding of the factors that influence people to smoke can increase awareness of mental health issues related to smoking and, in turn, potentially remove some of the stigma associated with smoking. The American Cancer Society (ACS) also recommends yearly lung cancer screenings for people who are 55-74 years old, are in fairly good health, and fall into one of the following categories:

- Current smoker or smoker who quit in the past 15 years
- Have a 30 pack-year smoking history – for example, someone who smoked 2 packs a day for 15 years [2 x 15 = 30]

Q: What is UI Health currently doing to help advance the fight against lung cancer?

A: The UI Cancer Center and the Mile Square Health Center are actively partnering with the local community through programs like MY QUIT™, a smoking cessation program for teens. UI Health is also a strong partner with the Illinois Tobacco Quitline and various other tobacco cessation programs. In addition to the partnerships with these community outreach programs; UI Health is also working with local healthcare providers to find out when patients have gone through smoking cessation programs to provide those individuals with additional resources and assistance.

Quitting smoking is hard. If you are a smoker and want assistance with quitting, the State of Illinois Central Management Services (CMS) offers a smoking cessation program. You should also check with your health insurance provider to see if they offer similar programs. The Great American Smokeout® on November 19 offers a starting point for taking one day at a time towards your journey to living smoke-free.

Additional information:

[American Cancer Society - Great American Smokeout®](#)

[Illinois Department of Central Management Services - Smoking Cessation Program](#)

