

SMALL CELL LUNG CANCER: WHAT TO KNOW



WHAT IS SMALL CELL LUNG CANCER (SCLC)?

Lung cancer starts when cancerous cells form in the tissues of the lung. There are **two main types** of lung cancer: **non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)** and **small cell lung cancer (SCLC)**.¹ 13% of all lung cancers in the United States are SCLC.²

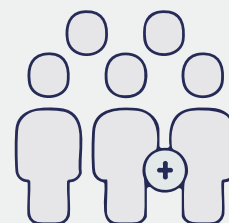
SCLC is the most aggressive form of lung cancer and **tends to spread quickly** to other parts of the body, including the brain, liver, and bones.^{1,3} Since SCLC grows quickly, it **tends to respond well to chemotherapy and radiation therapy**.¹

WHO DEVELOPS SCLC?

The risk for developing SCLC is much higher for current or former tobacco smokers. However, SCLC can also be caused by exposure to **secondhand smoke, asbestos, some inhaled chemicals, radiation, and air pollution**. Those with a **family history** of lung cancer may also be at a higher risk, too.⁴

HOW COMMON IS SCLC?

Approximately **30,000 to 35,000** new cases of SCLC are reported each year in the United States.⁵



WHAT IS THE AVERAGE AGE OF SOMEONE WHO IS DIAGNOSED WITH SCLC?



As with most other types of lung cancers, **SCLC mainly occurs in older people**, with the average age at diagnosis around 70. However, **a small number of people diagnosed are under the age of 45**.² The chances of getting SCLC increase as people get older.⁶

WHAT ARE THE STAGES AT DIAGNOSIS FOR SCLC?

SCLC is broken into two main stages: limited stage and extensive stage.³

Limited-stage SCLC is used to describe cancer that is only present in one part of the chest. About **1 out of 3 people** with SCLC have limited-stage disease when first diagnosed.³

Extensive-stage SCLC is used to describe cancer that has spread to other parts of the body such as the brain, liver, or bones. About **2 out of 3 people** with SCLC have progressed to extensive-stage disease when the cancer is first found.³

WHAT ARE COMMON SYMPTOMS OF SCLC?

Symptoms of SCLC include **unexplained weight loss, chest pain, shortness of breath, swelling of the neck or face, and coughing up phlegm, mucus or blood.**⁷



IS THERE A CURE?

There is no cure for SCLC, but there are several therapies available to treat it, either alone or in combination.⁶



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TREATMENTS FOR SCLC?

People with SCLC are treated with different combinations of chemotherapy drugs, radiation therapy, and immunotherapy. People might also have the option to undergo a new treatment that is being studied in a clinical trial.⁶

The stage of cancer is a key decision factor in the therapy a doctor selects. **Limited-stage SCLC** is often treated with chemotherapy, either alone or combined with radiation therapy (called concurrent chemoradiation), and may be followed by immunotherapy.⁶

Extensive-stage SCLC is typically treated initially with a combination of chemotherapy and immunotherapy. If this initial treatment slows or stops the cancer from growing, treatment may be continued with maintenance therapy, which is often immunotherapy and can be combined with another anti-cancer therapy. Some doctors may also recommend radiation therapy to parts of the body where cancer has spread, or palliative therapy to ease symptoms.⁶ Initial treatments can help stop cancer growth, but SCLC often comes back (recurs). Subsequent treatments can include chemotherapy or other medicines that attack cancer cells in different ways.⁵



WHAT STEPS CAN I TAKE TO REDUCE THE RISK OF DEVELOPING SCLC?

Refraining from using tobacco products, such as cigarettes, cigars or pipe tobacco—in addition to **reducing any exposure to harmful chemicals**—are all steps that can be taken to avoid lung cancer risk factors. **Knowing if there is a history of cancer in your family** is also important.⁴

References

1. American Cancer Society. What is lung cancer? Updated January 29, 2024. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer/about/what-is.html>
2. American Cancer Society. Key statistics for lung cancer. Updated January 13, 2026. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/lung-cancer/about/key-statistics.html>
3. American Cancer Society. Small cell lung cancer stages. Updated January 29, 2024. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging-sclc.html>
4. American Cancer Society. Lung cancer risk factors. Updated January 29, 2024. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/types/lung-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>
5. National Organization for Rare Diseases. Small cell lung cancer. Updated October 31, 2023. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://rarediseases.org/rare-diseases/small-cell-lung-cancer/>
6. National Cancer Institute. Small cell lung cancer treatment (PDQ®) – patient version. Updated May 8, 2025. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.gov/types/lung/patient/small-cell-lung-treatment-pdq>
7. American Cancer Society. Signs and symptoms of lung cancer. Updated February 27, 2025. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/lung-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html>