If your lung cancer can’t be cured
Supportive and palliative care

Unfortunately, for many different medical reasons, often people can never be cured of lung cancer. This will be an exceptionally difficult time for you and your family. Many people become preoccupied with thoughts about treatments and why there is no curative treatment suitable for them. It is common to experience blame and anger. All patients should have access to both community and hospital based palliative care teams. Remember, even though your cancer can’t be cured you may be able to live with your disease, enjoying a good quality of life.

If you have questions about your treatment, do not hesitate to discuss them with your doctor or specialist nurse. There are many professionals who will be able to help you and your carers through this difficult time.

My doctor has referred me to the palliative care team. What does this mean?

The palliative care team is usually made up of medical and nursing staff with special skills in pain control and symptom management.

They work in a variety of settings including hospitals, the community, and in specialist units such as hospices. The main purpose of the palliative care team is to make sure that you are comfortable and ensure the best possible quality of life for both you and your family.

Will the palliative care nurse come to visit me at home?

Yes, the palliative care nurse works closely with your GP and district nurse to ensure that you get the best possible care and support in your own home. This will mean that you have easier access to a greater number of specialist services that may include day care, in-patient care and pain or breathlessness clinics. These services are to complement, not replace, the support given to you at home.

If you have not been offered this service and would like a palliative care nurse to visit you, speak to your GP, hospital doctor or specialist nurse.

Is there any help available if I need nursing during the night?

Yes, this service is usually provided by agencies such as Marie Curie Cancer Care. These nurses can stay with you overnight to give physical/emotional support. This may also allow your carer some time to rest. Speak to your district nurse or GP to find out who provides this service in your area.

Will I become very short of breath?

Many people with lung cancer become breathless. This can be a very frightening sensation and it is understandable if you feel panicky. However, there are some ways in which you can help yourself,
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such as opening a window or using a fan. Your doctor or nurse may refer you to a breathlessness clinic, physiotherapist or occupational therapist who will help you learn some relaxation techniques. If necessary your doctor may also prescribe medicine to help calm and relax you.

The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation has a useful booklet called Lung Cancer - A Practical Guide to Breathlessness. Call 0800 358 7200 for your free copy.

Am I going to have a lot of pain?

Not necessarily. However, if you do have pain then it will be controlled by using a variety of different treatments. These may include: palliative chemotherapy/radiotherapy, as well as strong medicines or perhaps complementary therapies such as acupuncture. It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you are experiencing any pain.

Will I have to take morphine?

You might feel frightened about taking morphine as it is sometimes thought of as being linked to death and addiction. This is not true - it is a very useful painkiller and can also help reduce breathlessness. You should still be able to carry out most day to day activities such as driving. However, morphine can at times make you drowsy, especially when you first start taking it. Do not drive if you feel at all drowsy.

Should I plan for the future?

For many people, a diagnosis of lung cancer may mean that life will never be the same again. Remember, death is an inevitable end result for all of us, but something which we rarely consider. You may find that for the first time in your life you start to think about what the future holds and the possibility of death. Many people find it helpful to get things in order. These issues can be very difficult to consider. However, you might find that making plans and discussing them with your family and friends can be helpful in "clearing the decks" and allowing you to get on with living.

Being told that you have a terminal disease may provide an opportunity to plan for death in a way that someone who dies suddenly is unable to. If you would like to make a will, but are unsure of how to go about it, call The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation on 0800 358 7200, for a free will guide.

How do I find out how much time I have left?

The truthful answer is that nobody really knows. It depends on many factors, such as, what type of lung cancer you have and how well the cancer responds to palliative treatment. Based on their past experience, doctors can sometimes make an estimate. However, doctors can often get this wrong.
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Can I choose where I die?
Help and advice will be given for you to plan for death in the place of your choice. It is possible for care and support to be given at home, in hospital or in a hospice. It is important that you discuss your wishes with your family and all those involved in your care.

Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation is the only charity in the UK wholly dedicated to the defeat of lung cancer. It funds research into prevention and early diagnosis, provides information and support as well as helping people to quit smoking. A variety of patient-focused lung cancer information materials are available free of charge to people affected by lung cancer. For further information and details of your local support services please call The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Helpline on:

0333 323 7200