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Lung cancer survivors experience long-term effects of breathlessness

Strategies which improve physical activity or relieve depressive symptoms may provide relief

With the growing number of long-term lung cancer survivors, research is needed to identify and address cancer survivorship issues. One of the most common and debilitating symptoms among lung cancer patients is dyspnea, or shortness of breath. As most studies of dyspnea have reviewed patients with active lung cancer or immediately after treatment, the prevalence of dyspnea over the long-term once treatment has been completed is not well characterized.

In a study featured in the August edition of the *Journal of Thoracic Oncology*, Marc B. Feinstein, MD describes the prevalence and severity of dyspnea in long-term lung cancer survivors and provides specific factors associated with the condition that may help clinicians target post-treatment rehabilitation strategies. Dr. Feinstein and fellow researchers at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School surveyed 342 early-stage lung cancer survivors, who had their tumor removed within one to six years of the survey. Within this population of cancer survivors, dyspnea was found in 205 individuals (60 percent), nearly three-fold the number of patients who presented with dyspnea before their surgery (21 percent).

Additional findings showed that factors associated with long-term dyspnea in cancer survivors included presence of dyspnea before lung cancer surgery, reduced diffusion capacity (lung's ability to transfer oxygen into the blood) and lack of physical activity. Depression symptoms also were assessed, but were not very prevalent in the study sample (occurring among 10 percent of lung cancer survivors), but were nonetheless strongly associated with dyspnea.

"The identification of potentially modifiable risk factors associated with dyspnea is perhaps the most significant finding," affirms Marc Feinstein, MD, assistant attending physician in the Pulmonary Service at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. "This implies that strategies which improve physical activity or relieve depressive symptoms may results in improved breathlessness."

Researchers concluded that future research is needed to test whether screening and intervening for depression and physical inactivity among lung cancer survivors improves dyspnea in long-term lung cancer survivors.

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Journal of Thoracic Oncology (JTO) – (journals.lww.com/jto)

The JTO is a prized resource for medical specialists and scientists who focus on the detection, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of lung cancer. The JTO is the official monthly journal of the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC.org) and emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach, including original research (clinical trials and translational or basic research), reviews and opinion pieces.

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