

Atlas of Healthcare Variation

Consumer summary | Lung cancer

The Atlas of Healthcare Variation is a website where you can look at maps, graphs, tables and words to show differences in health care in New Zealand by district health board (DHB) or regions responsible for delivering or monitoring specialist health services. The differences that show up are a good starting point for asking questions about why people get different treatments in different DHBs. When these questions are asked it can help DHBs to make changes to improve what they do.

The lung cancer Atlas shows how many people aged over 15 years were diagnosed and treated for lung cancer in each DHB between 2008 and 2012. It includes people who were treated in public hospitals but not those treated in private hospitals.

Why have we chosen lung cancer for this atlas?

Lung cancer is one of the most common cancers in New Zealand. People with lung cancer tend to live for less time after they are diagnosed than people with other cancers.

For the best chance of living a longer life you need to be seen by your doctor and be treated before the cancer has spread too far through your lungs or into other parts of your body. The different sorts of lung cancer (small cell or non-small cell), where it has spread to in your body and what your general health is like, are all important factors when considering treatment. Treatment options include surgery (only for non-small cell lung cancer), radiotherapy, chemotherapy, symptom control, or a combination of these. Your doctor will discuss all of these things with you and your family/whanau if you prefer.

The lung cancer Atlas shows

- how many people were diagnosed with lung cancer
- what stage (i.e. how advanced) the cancer was when they were diagnosed
- how many people received treatment that removed the cancer (e.g. surgery) or reduced the size of the tumour or slowed the cancer's growth (e.g. chemotherapy or radiotherapy)

What does the atlas on lung cancer tell us?

In the five year period just over 9000 people aged 15 and over were diagnosed with lung cancer. Most of the people (75 percent) had advanced cancer which left little opportunity for treatment that might cure the cancer (e.g. surgery). More people had non-small cell lung cancer (89%) than small cell lung cancer (11%).

The main points shown on the atlas were

- Over half (61 percent) of the people with lung cancer had some cancer treatment (surgery, radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy).
- Less than half (42 percent) of the people had radiotherapy treatment.
- Very few (20 percent) of people with non-small cell lung cancer were treated with chemotherapy and even fewer (14 percent) had surgery.
- More than half (66 percent) of the people with small cell lung cancer were treated with chemotherapy.
- Older people had less treatment than younger people.
- Māori had fewer operations but more chemotherapy and radiotherapy compared to non-Māori.
- Males had fewer operations and less chemotherapy compared to females.

There was little difference in treatment between DHBs except for people with small cell lung cancer who had chemotherapy, where wide differences were seen (49–85 percent).

How does NZ compare with other countries?

New Zealand is similar to other countries like England and Australia in the way that they treat lung cancer.

The main difference in New Zealand is that lung cancer was often found at a later stage. People with lung cancer in New Zealand also had

- more radiotherapy than people in England
- similar chemotherapy treatment for small cell lung cancer as people in England
- less surgery and chemotherapy for people with non-small cell lung cancer compared to England and Australia

Finding lung cancer early

Sometimes it is hard to know if you have lung cancer. Some of the signs to watch out for are

- a cough that does not go away or gets worse
- chest pain that is often worse with deep breathing, coughing, or laughing
- hoarseness
- weight loss and loss of appetite
- coughing up blood or rust-coloured sputum (spit or phlegm)
- shortness of breath
- feeling tired or weak
- infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia that don't go away or keep coming back

If you have had a cough for more than three weeks

- see your family doctor
- make sure your doctor is aware of your smoking history

Finding the cancer early gives you a much better chance of surviving lung cancer.

The best way to avoid lung cancer

Even though not all people who get lung cancer are smokers, smoking is strongly linked to lung cancer. The best way to avoid lung cancer is to stop smoking or keep away from places and people where you might breathe in smoke.

Further information

The Quit Group has a free telephone support service called Quitline. Phone 0800 778 778 or go to the Quit Group website: www.quit.org.nz.

Support for you or your family/whānau is available from the Cancer Society's Cancer Information Helpline. Phone 0800 CANCER | 0800 226 237 or www.cancer.org.nz.

For more detailed information about the lung cancer Atlas please go to www.hqsc.govt.nz/atlas/lung-cancer.