

Section Six: Managing lung cancer symptoms

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Te whakahaere i ngā tohumate
matepukupuku pūkahukahu



Key points:

- Lung cancer affects the tissue in and around the lung, and causes symptoms like breathlessness, coughing and chest pain.
- Lung cancer can make you less hungry, cause weight loss, and leave you feeling tired. You may have problems sleeping at night even though you feel tired.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you may be experiencing. As well as cancer treatments, your doctor may be able to refer you to other services to help you manage your cancer symptoms.

Ngā kōrero matua:

- Ka whakaawe te matepukupuku i te kikokiko kei roto i te pūkahukahu, e karapoti ana hoki i te pūkahukahu me tōna whakaputa tohumate pērā ki te hēmanawa ki te hā, te maremare, me te mamae ki te uma.
- Ka iti ake tō hiakai nā te matepukupuku pūkahukahu, ka puta pea he ngaronga taumahatanga, ka hiamoe koe i te nuinga o te wā. Tērā pea ka raruru koe ki te moe pai i ngā po ahakoa tō kaha hiamoe.
- Kōrero ki tō tākuta, ki tō tapuhi rānei e pā ana ki ngā tohumate tērā pea ka rongo koe. I tua atu i ngā maimoa matepukupuku, e āhei ana pea tō tākuta ki ētahi atu ratonga hei āwhina i a koe ki te whakahaere i ō tohumate matepukupuku.

Ways of managing lung cancer symptoms

Lung cancer affects the tissue around the lung, and causes symptoms like breathlessness, coughing and chest pain.

Lung cancer can also make you less hungry, cause weight loss, and leave you feeling tired. You may have problems sleeping at night even though you feel tired.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you may be experiencing, even if they are not listed below. As well as cancer treatments, your doctor may be able to refer you to a palliative care service to help you manage your cancer symptoms.

Breathlessness (being short of breath)

Managing lung cancer-related breathlessness will depend on the cause of your shortness of breath.

Your doctor may do some tests to investigate the cause of your breathlessness. Tests may include a chest X-ray and blood tests.

Ways of managing breathlessness include:

- medication
- breathing techniques
- relaxation exercises
- chemotherapy or radiation to shrink a cancer
- oxygen therapy (in hospital and/or at home)
- treatment for pleural effusion (see page 36).

If you are feeling breathless, try the Action Plan for Breathlessness on the inside back cover of this booklet. You may like to cut this Action Plan out and stick it on your fridge or somewhere you can find it easily.

Medication

Your doctor may give you medication to help with breathlessness caused by lung cancer. These might help:

- treat a chest infection or pneumonia
- relieve wheezing or coughing
- reduce fluid build-up in the lungs
- manage anxiety related to breathlessness.

Breathing techniques

Although breathlessness can be a difficult symptom to live with, there are things you can do to reduce the way it affects your life.



You can find more information on breathing techniques, including videos on breathlessness, on our website: cancer.org.nz/breathlessness

Relaxation exercises

There are relaxation exercises you can do to help when feeling short of breath.



You can visit the relaxation space on our website for some exercises to practise at home: cancer.org.nz/relaxation

Pleural effusion

When fluid builds up in the area between the lung and the chest wall (pleural cavity), you may experience shortness of breath, tiredness or pain. This is called a pleural effusion.

Symptoms may be relieved by:

- thoracentesis (pleural tap)
- pleurodesis
- indwelling pleural drains.

Thoracentesis (pleural tap)

Fluid from around the lungs is drained out through a plastic tube inserted under local anaesthetic.

Pleurodesis

If the fluid returns after you have had a pleural tap, your doctor may suggest a procedure called pleurodesis. A pleurodesis uses a medical powder to stick the lung to the chest wall to reduce the chance of fluid building up again. This is usually done under general anaesthetic.

Indwelling pleural drain

If the fluid returns after you have had a pleurodesis, your doctor may consider placing a long-term draining tube into the space where the fluid is.

The tube remains in the space around the lung and is fixed to your skin with a dressing. The tube is connected to a small bottle that collects the fluid. You and your whānau will be taught how to care for this at home.

Cough

Coughing is a common symptom of lung cancer which can be upsetting, especially if you find it hard to stop.

The best way to manage coughing is to treat the lung cancer. If it is not possible to remove the cancer with surgery, using chemotherapy or radiation treatment to try to shrink the cancer can help.

Some medications can be used to reduce the effects of your cough. Commonly used medications are codeine, morphine and steroids.

Sometimes breathing in steam or having saline through a nebuliser (a fine spray) is helpful.

If you are coughing up green or dark yellow sputum (phlegm), you may have an infection and need to see your doctor.

Pain

Not everyone with lung cancer has pain. If you do have pain, you may not be in pain all the time and it can usually be well managed.

There is a range of prescription medications and complementary therapies to help with pain caused by lung cancer.

Pain relief works best when taken regularly. Tell your treatment team if your prescribed medications are not easing your pain as there are likely to be other pain-relieving medications you can try.

Radiation treatment or chemotherapy can also be used to treat cancer pain. Many people find a combination of more than one treatment helps, and it may take a little time to find the most effective pain control for you.

Morphine is a medication very commonly prescribed to reduce pain. It has the added advantage of reducing breathlessness and coughing.

Fatigue (no energy)

Fatigue can be described in many ways, including feeling exhausted, extremely tired, sleepy, drowsy, or finding it difficult to concentrate. Fatigue can appear suddenly and rest may not help. Here are some ideas to help cope with fatigue:

- Let people help you. Family, friends and neighbours may offer to help with tasks such as meals, shopping, childcare, housework and driving.
- Take a few weeks off work during or after having treatment or work fewer hours. You may be able to work from home.
- Do light exercise, such as walking, and keep up your normal exercise routine if approved by your doctor. Don't start any new exercise routine until you feel better after treatment.
- Try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Some people find small, frequent snacks more appealing than trying to eat a meal. If you have nausea, have your meals when you feel like eating.
- Fatigue may be caused by specific things found in blood tests and may be improved by treatment.

Trouble sleeping

Some people with lung cancer have trouble sleeping or have a problem falling asleep, which can affect how well they feel during the day. If you are in pain, this may also affect your sleep.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, these things may help:

- Try to wake up at the same time each day and go to bed at the same time each night.
- Create a quiet, dark and restful place for sleeping. Sleeping in a more upright position or in a recliner chair may be useful if lying flat makes you feel breathless or causes you to start coughing.
- Reduce caffeinated drinks like tea, coffee and soft drinks, and alcohol (especially in the afternoons and evenings). These may give you energy but leave you unable to sleep.
- Use your pain medication as prescribed if pain is keeping you awake.
- If pain is not the issue, ask your doctor about sleeping tablets.



You can find more information in our information sheet If you have difficulty sleeping on our website: cancer.org.nz/sleep-problems

Nausea (feeling sick)

If you have lung cancer, it is common to feel sick at some point. This can be caused by many different things, including cancer treatments, the cancer itself, pain and anxiety.

People have found it helpful to:

- eat small meals at frequent intervals
- avoid fatty or fried foods
- rest before and after eating
- not lie flat during or after eating
- drink plenty of fluids
- see a dietitian or nurse for dietary advice
- try relaxation or mindfulness exercises
- do something enjoyable as a distraction from feeling sick.

Anti-sickness medications work in different ways, depending on the cause of your nausea. Let your doctor know if you feel sick or if the medication you are using is not working – there may be something else you can try.



You can find more information on nausea on our website:
[cancer.org.nz/eating-well-with-cancer](https://www.cancer.org.nz/eating-well-with-cancer)

Weight loss

Weight loss is a common symptom of lung cancer. If you are underweight or losing weight, try to eat good sources of protein and include high-energy (high-calorie) foods in your diet.

Good sources of protein and energy include:

- meat, fish or poultry
- milk and dairy products
- legumes (for example, baked beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils) and nuts.

If you have tried increasing your energy intake but still struggle to eat enough, you may benefit from a nutritional supplement drink. Talk with a dietitian or your treatment team to get the right supplements for your needs.



You can find more information about managing weight on our website:
<https://www.cancer.org.nz/managing-your-weight/>