Breathing Better

Respiratory therapist Mark Courtney, RRT, is a manager of the American Lung Association's Lung HelpLine.

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What medical role does a respiratory therapist play?

We are physician assistants who work closely with pulmonologists or other physicians to meet the respiratory needs of people who have chronic lung disease.

What are common issues in people with lung cancer?

Lung tissue is very vulnerable to cancer and its treatments, especially surgery and radiation. Some cancers near large airways can partially or completely block air movement. The most common symptom is shortness of breath. Also, after lung surgery, some people have phantom pains that come and go.

How do you assist after lung cancer treatment?

We look for coughing and breathing problems as well as swallowing issues during and after treatment. By encouraging deep breathing and coughing, we may help patients avoid post-surgery complications such as pneumonia or lung collapse. Supplemental oxygen and breathing treatments, such as use of an inhaler or CPAP machine, may also help, especially in someone with an underlying lung disease, such as asthma or COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease]. We work with nursing staff to get people up and moving as soon after surgery as they are able to prevent complications. And we help assess needs, such as home oxygen, for discharge planning.

How does the American Lung Association help?

The Lung HelpLine is a dedicated telephone helpline—800-LUNG-USA—where we talk, and we also have [online] chats and email. We get calls from people with lung cancer quite often. Some people have concerns over CT scan results; others with later-stage disease may call to talk about treatment options. We often talk to people about how to set up home oxygen and how to be their own advocate.

What about COVID-19 risks?

If you're going through treatment for lung cancer and you get infected with the coronavirus, you're at higher risk for more severe disease. We advise everybody to strongly consider getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

What advice do you commonly give your patients?

We're not physicians, but we are always giving people a list of things to ask their doctor about, things that we know can help. We send information or steer them to the right medical resources on the internet—either our website (Lung.org) or other trusted websites. We share tips for dealing with lingering pain, such as using a heating pad, soaking in a hot tub or getting a massage.

Do you help people who have other kinds of cancer?

Yes, especially if they need to be admitted to the hospital. Some people undergoing treatment for other cancers may have weakened immune systems, causing respiratory infections, such as pneumonia. Patients with oral cancer may require special airways, like a tracheostomy tube or laryngectomy tube, both of which require airway management.

What do you find most fulfilling about your work?

What's rewarding are the patient interactions. We don't rush any calls. This has given me all the time I need to make connections with people and make sure that I'm doing as much as I can to answer their questions.

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