

PCRS Position Statement



National screening for lung cancer

June 2023

PCRS supports the UK National Screening Committee's recommendation that people at high risk of lung cancer have screening and encourage the committee to ensure that the screening programme maximises opportunities for diagnosis of lung disease beyond lung cancer and to ensure ongoing provision of smoking cessation services. We encourage the UK National Screening Committee to ensure that appropriate pathways are in place for people who are found to have non-cancer respiratory symptoms which need investigating, that the right pathway is in place and accessible in a timely fashion to support patients who may have a non-cancer respiratory illness and that patients are screened for the most common cause of death in this group – cardiovascular disease. We look forward to seeing a full analysis of the pilots and detailed proposals for a national screening programme.

Primary Care Respiratory Society 483 Green Lanes, London, N13 4BS
Registered Charity 1098117 Company No 4298947 VAT Registration Number 866 1543 09
Telephone +44 (0)1675 477600 Email info@pcrs-uk.org Website <http://www.pcrs-uk.org>

The Primary Care Respiratory Society is grateful to its corporate supporters including AstraZeneca UK Ltd, Chiesi Ltd and Lupin Healthcare Limited, for their financial support which supports the core activities of the Charity and allows PCRS to make its services either freely available or at greatly reduced rates to its members.

Background

A phased roll-out of a national screening programme for lung cancer in the UK is underway with national coverage expected by 2024.¹ At the present time, screening for lung cancer is only available in the USA and China as an optional health check.

The conditions for which national screening programmes are available in the UK are selected after evaluation by the National Screening Committee, which advises the Government on which conditions justify having a programme. The Committee uses strict criteria in order to determine whether morbidity and mortality in the UK would benefit from a screening programme, and reviews the evidence based on these criteria. From time to time, the National Screening Committee reviews the conditions for which national screening programmes exist, and explores the merits of adding additional conditions to their list.

The NHS Long Term Plan set out an ambition that 55,000 more people will survive their cancer for 5 years or more, with an ambition to increase the number of cancers diagnosed at potentially curable stages I and II.² There is evidence that screening for lung cancer using computerized tomography (CT) according to risk criteria such as age and ever smoking status has seen potential to identify lung cancers at an early disease stage³ and reduce mortality rates.⁴ The results of the UK Lung Screening Trial (UKLS) published in November 2021, provide confirmation that lung cancer screening using low-dose CT in high risk groups can cut lung cancer mortality rates.⁵ The study randomised 4055 participants aged 50 to 75 years with a high risk of developing lung cancer over 5 years to LDCT or to no screening (usual care) between 2011 and 2013. The risk of lung cancer mortality was reduced by 16% with screening although there was no difference in the all-cause mortality rate. However, it remains to be decided if and how a lung cancer screening program will be introduced in the UK, because although lung cancer diagnosis and survival are improved the overall mortality rate is not. Why this is so remains unclear. The issue of quality of life during the remaining life years has also not yet been considered.

From August 2019, the Targeted Lung Health Check Programme has been available in some areas of England for those between 55 and 75 years of age who have ever smoked.⁶ The programme will run for 4 years and will consist of 14 pilot projects that will deliver screening to around 600,000 people.⁷ Initially, the pilot screening projects included 23 locations in England with a further 26 locations added as

of April 2022. The aim is to extend this coverage to all areas of England by 2024.⁸ Individuals identified in their GP record as having ever smoked will be invited for screening and their risk of lung cancer will be assessed, spirometry conducted and smoking cessation support offered if required. Those identified as at increased risk for lung cancer are offered a CT scan. The programme has the potential to detect approximately 3,400 cancers and save hundreds of lives across the country. The result of these pilot projects will be used to inform the appropriate level of risk on which to base an offer of a CT scan for use in a National screening programme.⁹ Early data and experience from the pilot studies is encouraging with high attendance rates and improvements in the stage of disease at diagnosis.¹⁰ This service will not address the most common cause of death among smokers – cardiovascular disease and no formal process for referral of patients whose CT results raise a suspicion for other respiratory diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

There are currently no Lung Health Checks taking place in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Lung cancer and COVID-19

There are anecdotal reports for missed or delayed diagnoses of lung cancer as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, although there are no data to suggest that these anecdotal reports are more common than during pre-pandemic years. There may be many reasons for this including symptom overlap between COVID-19 and lung cancer (notably persistent cough), changes in patient behaviour and increased use of remote consultations in primary care making holistic assessment more challenging. It is essential that clinicians maintain a high degree of suspicion for potential cases being disguised by COVID-19 symptoms, including safety-netting of patients with long-COVID symptoms.¹¹

Moving towards a National Screening Programme

The UK National Screening Committee now recommends that people at high risk of lung cancer have screening.¹² The recommendation is for targeted lung cancer screening with integrated smoking cessation service provision. However, the details of the screening programme have yet to be announced and the committee has asked for more modelling work to help refine its recommendation, address implementation challenges and determine optimum protocols and screening pathways. During the consultation process, PCRS co-signed a submission coordinated by Asthma + Lung UK

in which we encouraged the Committee to ensure that the screening programme maximised opportunities for diagnosis of lung disease beyond lung cancer and to ensure provision of smoking cessation services at local levels that will offer continued support for current smokers starting a quit attempt.

While this programme is introduced the Lung Health Check services will continue.¹³

PCRS position

- PCRS continues to welcome to the Targeted Lung Health Check Programme and its expansion to cover additional locations across England. It is good that the programme is being extended from the perspective of implementation research to generate more evidence, and before it is confirmed as a national programme.
- We welcome the UK National Screening Committee's recommendation that people at high risk of lung cancer have screening but encourage the committee to ensure that the screening programme maximises opportunities for diagnosis of lung disease beyond lung cancer and to ensure provision of smoking cessation services at local levels that will offer continued support for current smokers starting a quit attempt.
- As the UK National Screening Committee move towards the development and implementation of a National Screening Programme we encourage careful consideration of:
 - o The pathway for people who are found to have non-cancer respiratory symptoms which need investigating, and the implications for workload in general practice.
 - o The right pathway is in place to support patients who may have a non-cancer respiratory illness. While CT scanning will be the main intervention, individuals will also be offered an 'MOT/lung health check for their lungs' which may identify potential cases of COPD or other respiratory illness.
 - o Patients, especially those who smoke, are screened for the most common cause of death in this group – cardiovascular disease.
- PCRS look forward to seeing a full analysis of the pilots and detailed proposals for a national screening programme.

References

1. Cancer Research UK. Screening. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/lung-cancer/getting-diagnosed/screening>. Accessed June 2023.
2. NHS. NHS Long Term Plan. Available at: <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/>. Accessed June 2023.
3. Field JK, et al. The UK Lung Cancer Screening Trial: a pilot randomised controlled trial of low-dose computed tomography screening for the early detection of lung cancer. *Health Technol Assess* 2016;20:1-146.
4. De Koning HJ, et al. Reduced lung cancer mortality with volume CT screening in a randomized trial. *NEJM* 2020;382:503-513.
5. Field JK, et al. Lung cancer mortality reduction by LDCT screening UKLS randomised trial results and international meta-analysis. *Lancet Regional Health Europe* 2021;10:100179. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762\(21\)00156-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762(21)00156-3/fulltext). Accessed June 2023.
6. Cancer Research UK. Lung Health Checks. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/lung-cancer/getting-diagnosed/lung-health-checks>. Accessed June 2023.
7. NHS. Evaluation of the Targeted Lung Health Check Programme. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/contact-us/privacy-notice/how-we-use-your-information/our-services/evaluation-of-the-targeted-lung-health-check-programme/>. Accessed June 2023.
8. Locations in England for Targeted Lung Health Checks. Available at: <https://www.ndcanceralliance.nhs.uk/our-work/prevention-awareness-and-screening/targeted-lung-health-checks/england-locations/>. Accessed June 2023.
9. Cancer Research UK. Lung Cancer Screening. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/screening/lung-cancer-screening#lung-screening1>. Accessed June 2023.
10. Grover H, et al. Implementation of targeted screening for lung cancer in a high-risk population within routine NHS practice using low-dose computed tomography. *Thorax* 2020;75:348-350.
11. https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/diagnosis/hp-covid-19-and-cancer-hub#HP_COVID-195. Accessed June 2023.
12. UK National Screening Committee. Adult screening programme: Lung cancer. Available at: <https://view-health-screening-recommendations.service.gov.uk/lung-cancer/>. Accessed June 2023.
13. Cancer Research UK. Lung Health Checks. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/lung-cancer/getting-diagnosed/lung-health-checks>. Accessed June 2023.