What’s the Average Life Expectancy of Someone Living With Stage 4 Lung Cancer?

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Stage 4 Lung Cancer Life Expectancy

Getting a cancer diagnosis is scary and one of the first things you might want to know (or may be too afraid to ask) is how long you might be expected to live. Many cancers are treatable, especially if they are diagnosed early, but once they have spread, then they cannot usually be cured. However, with modern medical advances many stage 4 cancers can be managed, giving patients a longer lifespan than may have previously been possible.

In this article we explore stage 4 lung cancer life expectancy, and what the patient and their support group might expect.

What is Lung Cancer?

Lung cancer happens when cells in the lungs grow out of control, most commonly in the bronchi, bronchioles, and alveoli. There are two types of lung cancer: small cell lung cancer and non-small cell lung cancer. Small cell lung cancer is usually associated with people who have smoked heavily and it accounts for just 10% to 15% of lung cancers. The more common type is non-small cell lung cancer, which covers subtypes such as squamous cell carcinoma, adenocarcinoma, and large cell carcinoma.

What Are the Common Symptoms of Lung Cancer?

Lung cancer is often not diagnosed until it has metastasized or spread elsewhere in the body. Therefore, anyone experiencing the symptoms below should immediately see their doctor, because if it is diagnosed early treatment is more likely to be successful.

Symptoms of lung cancer include the following:

- A new, lingering cough
- Coughing up blood or rust-colored phlegm or sputum
- Feeling breathless
- Pain in the chest which is worse when you breathe deeply
- Feeling hoarse
- Unexplained weight loss
- Pain in your bones
- Feeling tired or weak
- Headaches
- Wheezing

A rarer type of lung cancer is a Pancoast tumor which has its own distinctive symptoms:

- Having a droopy or weak eyelid
- The droopy eyelid has a small pupil
- A lack of sweat on one side of the face

If lung cancer has spread, then you might experience the following symptoms:

- Bone pain, for example in your pelvis or back
- Headache
- Numbness in your arm or leg
- Dizziness or balance issues
- Yellow skin
- Swollen lymph nodes, such as in the neck

What is Stage 4 Lung Cancer?

Stage 4 lung cancer is where the cancer has spread, both within the lung and elsewhere in the body. When lung cancer has spread to another part of the body it is a secondary cancer, or metastatic cancer.

Lung cancer is most likely to spread to nearby lymph nodes, via the lymphatic system, to the brain, bones, liver, or adrenal glands.

What is the Life Expectancy for Stage 4 Lung Cancer?

Life expectancy for lung cancer depends how quickly it is diagnosed, as well as the type of cancer it is, and the stage.

Your chance of survival depends on many factors. Younger people have a higher survival rate compared to older people. Fit and healthy people have a higher life expectancy, and women tend to survive longer than men.

On average, just 7% of people with stage 4 non-small cell lung cancer and 3% of those with small cell lung cancer will survive for 5 years or more.

However, one should remember that these are historic rates and current medical advances will not be reflected in the figures. By their nature, these figures are five years old, and we will not know how people diagnosed today with stage 4 lung cancer will compare.

What Should the Patient and Support Group Expect?

Treatment for stage 4 lung cancer includes surgery, to remove the part of the lung affected. This could be a small section or as much as the entire lung, leaving one healthy lung.

Chemotherapy and radiation treatment can be used to shrink tumors if they are too large for surgery. They can also be used after surgery, or if surgery is not an option. Radiation therapy and chemotherapy can also be used to treat the symptoms of stage 4 lung cancer, including pain.

Targeted drug therapy can be used when certain cell abnormalities are found, to focus on the abnormal cells and kill them. Immunotherapy is also used to harness the body’s own immune system to fight the cancer.

Most cancer treatments take their toll on the body, with side effects often causing pain or discomfort. Studies have shown that palliative care can sometimes help patients live longer than those who put themselves through the harsh treatment regime. Quality of life is important, and the type of support you receive as palliative care can improve your mood.

Looking After Yourself

If you have stage 4 lung cancer then it is important to treat your symptoms, whether they are related to the cancer itself or the treatment you are receiving. If you are tired, then you should rest, but exercise can also help, although you may not feel like it. It’s vital to control the pain, so speak to your medical team if you need stronger pain relief medication. Massage and relaxation techniques can help in this regard.

If the cancer has caused fluid around your lungs then a doctor can remove this to relieve discomfort, and if you have trouble swallowing then a dietician can recommend what types of food are easier to eat or drink, but still provide nourishment.

The most important thing is for you and your support team to work closely with your doctors to find the right treatment plan for you to live with as much comfort and dignity as possible.