

Lung Cancer's New Nemesis - Immunotherapy



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THE BLOG

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Harold Wimmer
National President and CEO, American Lung Association

There was a time, not long ago, when the words “immune system” and “lung cancer” didn’t seem to go together. At the American Lung Association, I’ve spent a lot more time thinking about how the immune system relates to influenza or tuberculosis, or even asthma than to lung cancer. But in recent years, the immune system has taken a place at the table in the lung cancer treatment discussion. And it’s ushered in an exciting new way to battle lung cancer—the leading cancer killer in America.

Researchers have long been looking at how the immune system is involved in the growth of cancer. The theory behind lung cancer immunotherapy is simple: get the immune system to recognize the cancer as bad and remove it, just as it does infections. Of course, in practice it is much more complicated than that, as the immune system has a complex system of checks and balances, relying on a variety of cells and receptors to do its job. A visual can help make this scientific process understandable, and our [interactive infographic](#) helps clarify the ins and outs of lung cancer immunotherapy.

In 2013, Science magazine declared cancer immunotherapy the 2013 “Breakthrough of the Year.” Progress in immunotherapies as a lung cancer treatment has been fast and furious since then. In 2015, nivolumab (Opdivo®) and pembrolizumab (Keytruda®) were approved as second-line therapy for lung cancer. A second-line therapy is a therapy given after the first (or first-line) doesn’t work or stops working. And in October 2016, we saw two new approvals: Tecentriq® (Atezolizumab) for second-line therapy and pembrolizumab (Keytruda®) as a first-line lung cancer immunotherapy treatment.



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What does this mean in practice? Patients have more treatment options than ever before. Previously, a patient with non-small cell lung cancer whose cancer progressed after being on treatment wasn't left with very many options. But now, a portion of those patients qualify to go on an immunotherapy drug. And for some patients, an immunotherapy drug may be a better first treatment option than traditional chemotherapy. While immunotherapy drugs are not for everyone and can have risks, these drugs are extending the lives of many patients. These successes breathe new hope into the battle to conquer lung

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I hope we continue to see new immunotherapy drug approvals and develop better data on which patients will benefit the most from these drugs. Our [LUNG FORCE](#) initiative is making great headway in turning curing lung cancer into a national priority. Two of our LUNG FORCE Heroes, Karen and Donna, bravely share their experience with immunotherapy in [our video](#).

These are exciting times for anyone touched by lung cancer. I know I will keep a close watch on the progress being made in this field and I encourage lung cancer patients to talk to their doctor about all of their treatment options, including immunotherapy.

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