



Were it not for a pain in his shoulder, Bill Martin's outcome might have been very different. That pain—from a pulled muscle—led to a diagnosis of lung cancer and quite possibly saved his life.

In June of 2010, Martin, a 64-year-old salesman from West Springfield, went to his primary care physician for a routine physical. Everything checked out fine, except for a nagging pain beneath his right shoulder blade.

A CT scan was negative, and his doctor corroborated Martin's belief that he had pulled a muscle. A follow-up CT scan, however, showed a small spot on Martin's lung on the opposite side of his painful muscle pull. Told it was likely pneumonia and put on an antibiotic, Martin was advised to follow-up with his doctor.

Six months later, Martin returned to his doctor and was asked if he ever followed up on the previous CT findings. When he said

he hadn't, his doctor ordered another scan, which again showed the spot on his lung.

A biopsy confirmed what the spot was: cancer. Martin was one of the lucky ones; Dr. Rose Ganim, a thoracic surgeon at Baystate Medical Center, successfully removed the tumor from his lung. His cancer was caught early enough that treatment wiped out the disease in his body before it could spread and cause lethal damage. Most aren't that fortunate.

KNOW THE SIGNS

Lung cancer kills nearly 159,000 Americans each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In fact, more people die of lung cancer than breast, colon, and prostate cancer combined. The overall survival rate for lung cancer—15.5%—is the same as it was 40 years ago, perhaps because the early signs of the disease mimic the symptoms of other illnesses and may be missed—or ignored—by patients and physicians. (By comparison, breast cancer survival has increased to 89% and prostate cancer to 99%.)

"The most important thing to remember," says Dr. Gary Hochheiser, chief of Thoracic Surgery at Baystate Medical Center, "is that there really are no early signs of lung cancer."

Oftentimes, early-stage tumors in the lung do not cause any symptoms as they grow. That said, people need to know their risk of getting lung cancer. Those with a significant history of smoking are at high risk of developing the disease. Hochheiser says cough is the number one presenting

PAYING ATTENTION TO EARLY SIGNS CAN CATCH CANCER BEFORE IT ADVANCES

By Scott P. Edwards



Bill Martin

symptom for lung cancer and those with a persistent cough need to be evaluated.

“The common cold is pretty ordinary,” he says, “so a lot of people ignore symptoms such as a cough. They’re busy and the cough is not bothering them, so they let it go.”

Most coughs don’t cause a problem until lung cancer is at an advanced stage and other symptoms, like pain in the chest, back or shoulder, crop up. Other possible symptoms of lung cancer include repeated infections, such as bronchitis or pneumonia, and a general decline in overall

health, including fatigue, loss of appetite, and seemingly unrelated symptoms like knee pain.

REFLUX RISK FACTOR

As the head of Thoracic Surgery at Baystate, Hochheiser also treats patients with esophageal cancer, which, like lung cancer, has few early warning signs.

Esophageal cancer is less common than lung cancer, with about 17,000 new cases and 15,000 deaths annually, but there is a big demographic—middle- and upper-class men—who are most at risk, which makes

pinpointing susceptible individuals much easier to identify.

The most common risk for esophageal cancer is reflux (a condition in which the esophagus, or food pipe, becomes irritated because of acid backing up from the stomach) that doesn’t go away, even if it is controlled with medication. Hochheiser says reflux can damage the lining of the esophagus and cause errors in a person’s DNA in a way that leads to cancer.

Patients with bad reflux should have an endoscopy to determine if they’re in the precancerous stage of disease. Another symptom of esophageal cancer is dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing, which starts off mild, but worsens as the esophageal opening narrows. This can cause patients to feel like food is stuck in their throat when they eat and lead to diet changes and unintended weight loss.

IGNORE AT YOUR PERIL

Hochheiser says that the bottom line with these two diseases is not writing off signs and symptoms that might

indicate early stages of disease.

“If you’re a smoker and have a family history of cancer and symptoms like a cough, get it checked out. If you have significant reflux, don’t ignore it and see your doctor,” he says.

Bill Martin, for one, concurs. “It wasn’t the cancer that caused my shoulder pain, but that’s what got me to the doctor,” he says. “Anytime you have something out of the ordinary, get it checked. I could have pooh-pooed the pain and they never would have found the cancer until it had advanced. It saved my life.”

For more information, contact Baystate Thoracic Surgery at 413-794-8050 or visit baystatehealth.org/thoracic.

WATCH THIS! Dr. Gary Hochheiser discusses esophageal and lung cancer at baystatehealth.org/thoracic.



Baystate thoracic surgeons Drs. Rose Ganim, Jeanne Lukanich, Gary Hochheiser, and Jacqueline Lee

POSSIBLE Symptoms of Lung Cancer

Because there are no obvious symptoms of early stage lung cancer, people need to know their risk factors. Those with a significant history of smoking are at high risk of developing the disease. Reflux, also known as GERD, is a risk factor for developing cancer in the esophagus (throat). Symptoms may include:

- Persistent cough
- Repeated infections, such as bronchitis or pneumonia
- General decline in overall health (fatigue, loss of appetite, and seemingly unrelated symptoms like knee pain)
- Pain in chest, back, or shoulder