

Monitoring a nodule in your lung (solitary pulmonary nodules)

Respiratory Medicine

Information for Patients

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What is a pulmonary nodule?

A pulmonary nodule is an area of shadowing in the lung. It is usually 3 centimetres or less and round in shape. It does not usually cause any symptoms, but can be seen on a chest x-ray or CT (Computed Tomography) scan.

Why do Pulmonary nodules happen?

Pulmonary nodules are common. About 1 in 4 older people who smoke, or who used to smoke, have nodules that can be seen on a CT scan. People who have never smoked may also have nodules that can be seen on a CT scan.

Most nodules are not cancer (benign), and may be due to scarring from previous lung infections. They are very common in people who have had TB (Tuberculosis), and can happen in people who have other conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis.

In a small number of people, a nodule could be a very early lung cancer, or sometimes a cancer that has spread from somewhere else in the body.

How are pulmonary nodules diagnosed?

Most pulmonary nodules are too small to be seen on a chest x-ray, and are often found when you have a CT scan. They are often found by accident, and were not the reason the CT scan was done in the first place.

We often cannot find out what the cause of a nodule is from the CT scan alone. We may not be able to take a sample of tissue from the nodule (Biopsy) because the nodule is so small.

If this is the case, we will monitor the nodule by repeating the CT scan after a period of time to see if it gets bigger.

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Benign nodules grow very slowly, and sometimes do not grow at all. Nodules that are cancerous will eventually grow, this can also happen very slowly.

To check if your nodule is changing, you will have a repeat CT scan after a few months. Pulmonary nodules grow slowly, so there is no point in having x-rays or scans more often than this.

If the nodule looks bigger or different in any way, your consultant may want to send you for more tests but these will be explained to you as needed.

What happens next?

Your consultant will talk about your case at a team meeting with other specialist doctors and nurses, so that the team can decide on the best treatment plan for you. After this, a repeat CT scan will be arranged, if needed. You may need to have several CT scans over a period of between 1 to 4 years depending upon the type of nodule and if any change is seen in the nodule. This way of monitoring pulmonary nodules has been followed worldwide over many years and is a well accepted method.

After each CT scan, you will get a letter to confirm your case has been talked about at the team meeting. If you have any new or worsening symptoms between your scans, such as pain in your chest, shortness of breath, or repeated chest infections, you should tell your GP, as we may need to bring forward your appointment to see your consultant.

Contact details

If you have any questions, please contact the medical secretary to the consultant on 0116 250 2938

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Previous reference:

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