

Pulmonary (lung) nodules

Patient information sheet

What is a pulmonary nodule?

A pulmonary nodule is a small, usually rounded, shadow in the lung which normally does not cause any symptoms. Nodules can be solitary or there may be more than one. Pulmonary nodules are common and often found incidentally on a chest X-ray or CT scan. Often they are unexpected findings and not related to the reason why the scan was being performed.

What causes pulmonary nodules?

Pulmonary nodules are more common in current or ex-smokers; however those who have never smoked can also develop pulmonary nodules. Most nodules are benign (non-cancerous) and can be due to scarring from a prior lung infection. Nodules can occur with other conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis or previous tuberculosis (TB) infection; these nodules usually do not grow and may resolve over time.

In a small number of people a pulmonary nodule can be malignant (cancerous). The pulmonary nodule may represent an early lung cancer or may be a cancer that has spread from another part of the body. Usually these nodules will change or get bigger with time.

How are pulmonary nodules monitored?

Pulmonary nodules are monitored over time; this is called surveillance. In order to check if your nodule is growing, you will have a repeat CT scan after a period of time decided by the doctor looking after you. There are formal guidelines to assist with this decision.

Nodules are monitored for two to four years. Once you have had your surveillance CT scan you will be contacted by telephone, or asked to come to clinic to discuss your results and follow up plan. If the nodule is unchanged after the period of surveillance, we do not need to continue to monitor the nodule, and you will be discharged. If the nodule looks bigger or different in any way, your doctor may wish to organise further tests.

What happens if the nodule increases in size?

Your doctor will discuss your case at a team meeting with a specialist radiology doctor and, following this, a decision is made on how to proceed. Further information about the nodule is often needed and either a positron emission tomography (PET) scan or a biopsy (tissue sample) is performed. A separate leaflet will be provided for either of these tests.

Author ID: Consultant chest physician
Department: Thoracic oncology
Printed: July 2024
Review date: July 2026
Version: 1.3
Leaflet number: PI 209



Large print copies and alternative language versions of this leaflet can be made available on request.

Royal Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Papworth Road, Cambridge
Biomedical Campus,
Cambridge CB2 0AY
Tel: 01223 638000
www.royalpapworth.nhs.uk

© 2024 Royal Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

A member of Cambridge University Health Partners

View a digital version of this leaflet by scanning the QR code



What happens at the nodule clinic?

You will be seen by one of the doctors and one of our specialist nursing team. They will be able to answer any questions you might have, show you your scans, and guide you through the next steps. Breathing tests (assessing your lung function) and blood tests may be performed when you come to the clinic; please allow time for this to happen.

What happens if I develop new symptoms during surveillance?

It is important that if you develop any new or worsening symptoms whilst you are under nodule surveillance, for example, a cough, coughing up blood, shortness of breath, or pain in the chest, you contact your GP or the nurse specialist. Stopping smoking is essential to prevent the progression and development of lung disease and lung cancer. Free services and support are available to help you quit smoking and this help can be accessed through your GP surgery, the NHS stop smoking helpline (at the end of this leaflet) or via your nurse specialist.

Please contact your specialist nurse if you have any questions:

My specialist nurse is:

Contact number:

Free Smokefree National Helpline: 0300 123 1044

Monday to Friday: 09:00 - 20:00

Saturday and Sunday: 11:00 to 16:00

nhs.uk/smokefree

Author ID: Consultant chest physician
Department: Thoracic oncology
Printed: July 2024
Review date: July 2026
Version: 1.3
Leaflet number: PI 209



Large print copies and alternative language versions of this leaflet can be made available on request.

Royal Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Papworth Road, Cambridge
Biomedical Campus,
Cambridge CB2 0AY
Tel: 01223 638000
www.royalpapworth.nhs.uk

© 2024 Royal Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

A member of Cambridge University Health Partners

View a digital version of this leaflet by scanning the QR code

