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Pollution contributing to 'thousands of lung cancers deaths in non-smokers'



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Lung cancer is on the rise among people who have never smoked because of increasing exposure to toxic air, but doctors — and politicians — are unaware of the problem's scale, experts warn.

In the UK 6,000 people a year die of lung cancer despite having never smoked, or having smoked a negligible number of cigarettes (fewer than 100 in their lifetime), a study has found, according to The Independent.

This makes lung cancer among non-smokers alone the eight biggest cancer-related cause of death in the country, ahead of leukaemia, lymphoma and cervical cancer.

But medical experts said the much stronger association with smoking has created stigma around the disease, disadvantaging those who don't smoke and curtailing research into other causes.

"For too long, having lung cancer has only been thought of as a smoking related disease," said Professor Paul Cosford, director of health protection at Public Health England (PHE) and lead author of the research that appeared in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine.

"This remains an important association but, as this work showed, the scale of the challenge means there is a need to raise awareness with clinicians and policy makers of the other risk factors including indoor and outdoor air pollution."

This is why PHE has published guidance for councils on improving air quality by stopping parents idling near school gates and promoting car pooling.

While smoking is the single biggest lifestyle factor that affects lung cancer — accounting for 86 per cent of cases — pollution, fumes from coal fire places, and second-hand smoke are also linked to its development.

Women were also much more likely to be affected by lung cancer despite never smoking, the authors said.

Smoking history is often the first question doctors will ask for patients coming in with symptoms that could be an early warning cancer, but not smoking could give false reassurance and send them down the wrong diagnostic path.

"Despite advances in our understanding, most people who have never smoked do not believe they are at risk and often experience long delays in diagnosis, reducing their chances of receiving curative treatment," Professor Mick Peake, co-author from the University College London Hospitals said.

"The stigma of smoking has been the major factor behind the lack of interest in, knowledge of and research into lung cancer.

"Therefore, in many ways, never-smokers who develop lung cancer are, as a result, disadvantaged."