

Focusing on You: Lung Cancer on the Rise in Non-Smoking Women

Sylvester offers targeted therapies for patients with rare genetic mutations.

Estelamari Rodriguez, M.D., M.P.H., a thoracic oncologist and Associate Director of Community Outreach at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, discusses an increasing number of lung cancer cases in non-smoking, younger women and the targeted therapies available to treat them. Wendy Reyes is one of those patients.

This is her story:

After a year of searching for answers, 37-year-old Wendy Reyes received a shocking diagnosis.

“You have lung cancer. I've been healthy my whole life,” says Wendy.

The nagging cough was a symptom of a rare type of lung cancer called RET fusion. Estelamari Rodriguez, M.D., M.P.H., a thoracic oncologist at Sylvester, says they're seeing a rise in this genetic mutation in younger women who have never smoked.

“Pollution may play a role, radon may play a role. But we also feel that perhaps younger women may be more susceptible to things in the environment that are triggering genetic changes,” Dr. Rodriguez says.

Dr. Rodriguez says the good news is there are therapies available now that target these genetic mutations. “You could diagnose each mutation for each patient, and then precisely offer a new drug for each patient based on that genetic abnormality,” says Dr. Rodriguez.

Sylvester, an NCI-designated cancer center, studied a new drug that specifically targets Wendy's type of tumor.

"The drug that we tested in the ARROW trial, called pralsetinib, is an oral once a day medication that is an inhibitor of this genetic change," Dr. Rodriguez says.

Patients did so well on the drug the U.S. Food and Drug Administration fast-tracked its approval. Wendy takes the pill every day and says the difference is amazing. "I was not able to even walk half a block without gasping for air. So now I can feel normally playing with my kids," Wendy says.

How do you feel about Dr. Rodriguez and her team at Sylvester?" asks anchor Pam Giganti.

"I'm very grateful for her and her team. They care about you," says Wendy.

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Non-smokers do develop lung cancer

Researchers estimate that as much as 20% of lung cancer deaths are among never-smokers. Learn what other risk factors there are for lung cancer outside of tobacco and what you can do to protect against them.

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