



Veterans and Lung Cancer: Why Screening and Biomarkers Matter

Show Notes

Brief Episode Summary

Veterans face a higher risk of lung cancer, from higher rates of smoking during service to on-the-job exposures like asbestos, burn pits, diesel exhaust, and Agent Orange. Yet lung cancer screening remains one of the most underused tools in American health care.

Patient host Michelle Alarid, a National Guard veteran who served in Desert Storm and a lung cancer survivor of more than 10 years, talks with thoracic medical oncologist and retired Navy Medical Corps captain Dr. Martin Edelman. Together they cover who qualifies for screening, why it saves lives, how biomarker testing shapes treatment, and why veterans diagnosed today have more reason for hope than ever.

Guests

Dr. Martin Edelman — Thoracic medical oncologist and clinical investigator at Fox Chase Cancer Center, where he chairs the Department of Hematology/Oncology. He also chairs the Department of Medical Oncology at Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine and serves as chair of LCFA's Scientific Advisory Board. Dr. Edelman is a veteran and retired U.S. Navy Medical Corps captain.

Michelle Alarid — Patient host and lung cancer survivor, and LCFA Speakers Bureau member. A National Guard veteran who served in Desert Storm, Michelle was diagnosed in 2015 at age 45, with her cancer caught at stage 1A. When it later spread to her brain, knowing her exact biomarker allowed her to start targeted therapy. She is a passionate advocate for early screening and biomarker testing.

Episode Highlights

Why Veterans Face Higher Risk: Dr. Edelman explains how above-average tobacco use (once heavily subsidized in the military), asbestos exposure in roles like Navy boiler techs and aircraft brake work, and era-specific exposures like Agent Orange can raise lung cancer risk. Michelle reflects on the burning oil, burn pits, and diesel exhaust she encountered in Desert Storm.

Who Should Be Screened: Current guidelines recommend screening for people over 50 with a significant smoking history, officially 20 pack-years. Dr. Edelman also notes research underway on screening other high-risk groups, including never smokers with a family history of lung cancer.

The Proof Behind Screening: Dr. Edelman, who served on the endpoint verification committee for the National Lung Screening Trial (NLST), explains why screening saves lives and how its benefit compares to mammography.

Symptoms Often Come Late: Michelle shares how a trip to the ER for unrelated back pain led to her early diagnosis, and Dr. Edelman describes the many ways lung cancer can present, from a pneumonia that won't clear to a seizure.

Staging, Simplified: A quick tutorial on localized, locally advanced, and advanced disease, and why finding lung cancer sooner is always better at every stage.

Screening Is Quick and Easy: Michelle describes her low-dose CT scan as quick, painless, and non-invasive. Dr. Edelman calls the scan a “teachable moment” for quitting smoking and managing heart and lung health.

Know Your Biomarkers: Why no one should treat lung cancer today without knowing the appropriate biomarkers, including PD-L1 for immunotherapy decisions and next-generation sequencing for mutations like EGFR and ALK, through tissue biopsy and blood tests for circulating tumor DNA.

Reasons for Hope: Michelle points to a recent VA study showing three-year lung cancer survival within the VA has more than doubled [CONFIRM source]. Dr. Edelman explains what's driving the progress, from immunotherapy and targeted therapy to promising KRAS research presented at ASCO, and why, for some patients with advanced disease, cure is no longer a far-fetched idea.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor: Know your type, stage, and biomarkers; ask whether full tumor sequencing was done; don't feel rushed if you're doing well; and consider a second opinion.

Links and Resources

- [Breath of Honor: Lung Cancer Screening for Veterans](#) — LCFA's veteran screening campaign
- [Veterans Resources and VA Screening Links](#)
- [Lung Cancer Screening](#)
- [Lung Cancer Screening Finder](#)
- [Lung Cancer Risks](#)
- [Biomarkers](#)
- [How to Talk to Your Doctor](#)
- [Get a Second Opinion](#)

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LCFA's mission is the improvement in survivorship of lung cancer patients through the funding of transformative science.



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