Military Exposure and Lung Cancer: A Veteran's Survival Story

Brief Episode Summary

A new VA-led study found that three-year survival for Veterans with non-small cell lung cancer treated at the VA more than doubled between 2007 and 2019, rising from 24% to 51%. Host James Hiter talks with Air Force Veteran and lung cancer survivor Gerry Spencer about what's behind that progress: earlier detection, expanded lung cancer screening, and more personalized treatment. Gerry shares how exposures during his service may have contributed to his diagnosis, why the "military mind" can keep Veterans from getting screened, and why taking ownership of your health is a sign of strength, not weakness.

What You'll Learn in this Episode

- Why Veterans may face a higher risk of lung cancer, including possible exposures to PFAS, asbestos, burn pits, and contaminated military sites
- How free low-dose CT screening through the VA works, and how to move past the "military mind" and scanxiety that keep many Veterans from getting screened
- How biomarker testing and personalized treatment are changing what a lung cancer diagnosis means, and the role of peer support and Veteran service organizations

Guests

James Hiter – Patient Advocate, LCFA Speakers Bureau. James is living with lung cancer and is the founder of Streak For a Cure, a non-profit raising awareness and funding for lung cancer research.

Gerard "Gerry" Spencer – Air Force Veteran, lung cancer survivor, and LCFA Speakers Bureau member. After Air Force ROTC, Gerry served as a hospital administrator and supply officer with the Strategic Air Command's 42nd Bomb Wing at Loring Air Force Base in Maine, then two years in Italy. Diagnosed with stage 3B lung cancer about nine years ago, he was treated with surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. Gerry is active in the American Legion in Dexter, Michigan, where he helps fellow Veterans facing a diagnosis.

Links and Resources

- LCFA's Breath of Honor: Lung Cancer Screening for Veterans - lcfamerica.org/get-involved/raise-awareness/breath-of-honor
- Lung Cancer Screening: lcfamerica.org/lung-cancer-info/screening
- Biomarker Testing: lcfamerica.org/lung-cancer-info/biomarker-testing
- More Than One Diagnosis: Gerry Spencer's Lung Cancer Story: https://lcfamerica.org/speaker-profile/gerard-gerry-spencer/

- The First 7 Days — Newly Diagnosed Roadmap: lcfamerica.org/living-with-lung-cancer/first-diagnosed
- LCFA Speakers Bureau - https://lcfamerica.org/speakers-bureau/
- VA Lung Cancer Screening: prevention.va.gov/preventing_diseases/screening_for_lung_cancer.asp
- Study: Trends in lung cancer survival in US Veterans (JNCI Cancer Spectrum, 2026): doi.org/10.1093/jncics/pkag054

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