Cancer: A risk factor for lung cancer is rising - it's not smoking and it affects us all

CANCER is caused by myriad factors, and while smoking has declined, air pollution has begun to play a larger role in the development of lung cancer globally.

Researchers at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University have compared the global trends for lung cancer, smoking, and air pollution. As fewer people use tobacco products the rates of Squamous Cell Carcinoma, a cancer that forms in the airways, has gone down. Across the same time period, the rise in pollution has seen an increase in adenocarcinomas. These types of cancers form in the glandular cells around the edges of the lungs, rather than in the airways.

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Across the study's timeframe of 1990 to 2012, a six percent decline in smoking was observed. This reduction in tobacco consumption saw a significant decrease in the prevalence of smoking-related cancers.

For each percentage point decline in smoking a nine percent decrease in lung squamous cell carcinoma was found.

Lung cancer remains one of the most common types of cancer, alongside breast cancer and prostate cancer.

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Air pollution has been linked to a global increase in lung cancers. (Image: Getty)

The study tied a 0.1 microgram per cubic metre increase in soot levels to a 12% increase in lung adenocarcinomas.
This effect is worldwide, and the amount of this pollutant has increased by 3.6 micrograms per cubic metre across the study’s timeframe, 1990-2012.

Soot is a by-product of combustion, formed when fossil fuels are not burned completely.

The Climate and Clean Air Coalition notes that it is a short lived pollutant, that only remains in the atmosphere for a few weeks.

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Soot production is broadly the result household cooking and heating, alongside transportation.

The Climate and Clean Air Coalition attributes these causes to 77 percent of black carbon product.

It is believed to be responsible for seven million pollution related deaths annually, increasing the risk of heart disease, lung disease and strokes.

It also has a potent impact on climate change, increasing temperatures by 460-1500 times more than the same mass of carbon dioxide.
Soot is attributed to a worsening a number of health conditions, and potentially causing others. Breathing conditions such as bronchitis and asthma can be aggravated by soot, with the solid particles embedding in the lung. Once inside the lungs, it is possible for the particles to enter the blood stream. This increases the risk of suffering a fatal heart attack or stroke.

Smoking still one of the largest risk factors for lung cancer. (Image: Express)
The CCA coalition advocates for global policies targeted at reducing amount of soot in the air by 80 percent by the end of the decade.

This would involve refitting home appliances that rely on impure fuels such as kerosene and lump coal.

Other policies they promote are the addition of filters on road vehicles to capture escaping soot, and the modernisation of some factory processes to reduce the amount of soot they produce.

A report they released claims that many of these programmes would provide a net profit after the initial investment required to implement changes.