

CMS Proposes To Cover Low-Dose CT Lung Cancer Screening For High-Risk Beneficiaries

Radiation stakeholders are pleased with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) proposed decision to add lung cancer screening coverage for high-risk seniors. This policy brings the CMS coverage policy in line with private health insurance coverage requirements for 2015. Dozens of lawmakers, cancer doctors and patients had urged CMS to cover the low-dose computed tomography (CT) lung cancer screening, and the Medical Imaging and Technology Alliance (MITA) says that as screenings for high-risk individuals could save up to 20,000 lives per year.

A summary of CMS' proposed decision says the evidence is sufficient for Medicare to cover lung cancer screening counseling and a shared decision making visit. Screening should be covered once a year as an additional preventive service under Medicare if a beneficiary is between 55-74, asymptomatic, has a history of tobacco smoking of at least 30-pack-years (smoking 20 cigarettes per day for a year counts as a pack year), and is a current smoker or has quit within the last 15 years. For the first screening, CMS says, the beneficiary must first discuss screening during counseling. For other screenings, beneficiaries can receive a written order for screening during a Medicare annual wellness exam, tobacco cessation counseling services, or other appropriate visit.

During counseling, CMS says, beneficiaries should discuss the benefits, harms, concerns with over-diagnosis, the false positive rate and radiation exposure. Beneficiaries must also be counseled on the importance of adhering to annual lung cancer screenings and the willingness to undergo diagnosis and treatment. CMS says the discussion should include how a beneficiary who has quit smoking can continue to do so and how a current smoker can stop.

CMS is collecting comments on its proposed decision.

The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommended screening similar high-risk groups earlier this year, though CMS proposed a narrower coverage age and will require providers to submit clinical and follow-up data to an approved registry, the American College of Radiology (ACR) notes. The ACR says it will apply to be a Medicare recognized registry.

Due to the USPSTF recommending the service, the Affordable Care Act requires private insurers to cover CT lung cancer screening as an essential health benefit in 2015.

Oncologists groups and lung cancer patient advocates in April urged the Medicare Evidence Development and Coverage Advisory Committee (MEDCAC) to recommend that Medicare cover these screenings for high-risk beneficiaries, though MEDCAC did not support coverage of the scans at its April meeting. This summer, 179 lawmakers added pressure on CMS to cover the services. McConnell, the incoming Senate Majority Leader when the Republicans take control in January, also asked CMS to "make an informed, timely decision" about coverage in late September.

ACR says that the screenings are the first and only cost-effective test proven to significantly reduce lung cancer deaths. "Lung cancer will kill 160,000 Americans this year -- more than breast, colon and prostate cancers combined. Medicare coverage of these exams helps complete the first major blow against this terrible disease," said Ella Kazerooni, chair of the ACR Lung Cancer Screening Committee and ACR Thoracic Imaging Panel.