

NEWS RELEASE

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Research released today finds over seven million¹ Australians at risk of lung disease

The Australian Lung Foundation today launches the Lung Health Checklist, a new tool to help Australians catch lung disease before it catches up with them.

Friday 30 October 2009... The Australian Lung Foundation released new research today showing more than seven million Australians (63 percent) aged ≥ 35 years claim to have been exposed to environmental or lifestyle factors which could put them at risk of lung disease – including harmful dust, gas or fumes in their workplace or a history of smoking.*¹

Prof Christine Jenkins, Concord Clinical School, University of Sydney and Head of Airways Group, Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, explained that lung disease encompasses a range of conditions, which the research indicates millions of Australians may be at risk of developing through environmental or lifestyle exposure.

"Asthma is probably the most common and best known lung disease in Australia; however there are many other lung diseases, some of which are even more serious. Lung disease incorporates a range of diseases such as lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and many lesser known conditions such as pulmonary fibrosis and pulmonary arterial hypertension," said Prof Jenkins. "While some of these can be a result of genetic factors, many lung diseases are caused by a history of smoking or exposure to dust, gas or fumes."

The research found more than a quarter of Australians aged ≥ 35 years claim to have worked in an environment for more than a year where they were exposed to dust, gas or fumes.¹ Furthermore, many Australians are also at risk of lung disease because of smoking at some point in their lives, with 51 percent of Australians aged ≥ 35 years stating they currently smoke or are ex-smokers.¹

Lung disease is a significant and growing health issue in Australia. Each year, lung disease places a considerable burden on the hospital system, resulting in nearly 350,000 hospitalisations and sadly causing 19,200 deaths.^{2,3}

During 2007-2008, there were 2.6 million⁴ cases of lung disease reported – but many more remain undiagnosed. Only about 25 percent of Australians with lung cancer are diagnosed early enough for curative surgery to be attempted.⁵ In addition, Australian research indicates that half of all those with COPD (e.g. emphysema or chronic bronchitis) are unaware they have the disease, even though it is advanced enough to already be affecting their quality of life.⁶

"Many lung problems are treatable if they are properly diagnosed," said Prof Lou Irving, Director of Respiratory Disease at Royal Melbourne Hospital. "Early signs of lung disease can include

breathlessness or wheeze; a persistent, new, or changed cough; chest pain and/or tightness; coughing up blood; mucus or phlegm and fatigue.”

According to the research more than a third of Australians (36 percent) who have experienced one or more of these symptoms have never spoken to their doctor about their symptom/s, which could be putting them at risk of serious illness or even death.¹

“While more than a third of Australians have experienced one or more lung disease symptoms in the last 12 months, many mistake the symptoms as part of ageing or due to a lack of fitness,” said Prof Irving. “It is essential that symptoms are evaluated correctly and Australians understand their lung health, as this can make a real difference to people’s day to day lives.”

To improve early diagnosis and encourage consumer awareness of lung disease symptoms, The Australian Lung Foundation today launched a new Lung Health Checklist, which was developed in consultation with leading respiratory clinicians.

Taking less than a minute to complete, the Lung Health Checklist is an online educational tool that encourages early diagnosis and allows people with respiratory symptoms to understand their lung health and effectively communicate with their doctor. It is available online at www.lungfoundation.com.au.

Mr William Darbshire, CEO of The Australian Lung Foundation, explained the Lung Health Checklist will be a valuable resource to many Australians who are looking for answers to their unexplained breathlessness.

“Climbing a flight of stairs shouldn’t feel like climbing Mount Everest. I encourage people to complete the checklist or the next time they climb a flight of stairs ask themselves whether they are more breathless than they should be,” said Mr Darbshire.

The launch of the Lung Health Checklist coincides with the beginning of Lung Health Awareness Month taking place nationally in November. Lung Health Awareness Month incorporates numerous events and initiatives which aim to raise awareness of lung disease and the importance of early diagnosis among Australians. For further information or help and support The Australian Lung Foundation can be contacted on 1800 654 301 or visit www.lungfoundation.com.au.

“It’s not normal to have an ongoing cough or to be breathless with your regular activities – use the Lung Health Checklist today and speak with your healthcare provider about your lung health,” concluded Prof Irving.

– Ends –

NOTE: The Australian Lung Foundation is presenting the research results and the Lung Health Checklist at **9.30am, Friday 30 October at The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, 431 Glebe Point Road, Sydney.**

If you would like to attend or receive information about this event, please contact:

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EDITOR'S NOTES

* The consumer research conducted by Galaxy Research and commissioned by The Australian Lung Foundation showed 63% of respondents aged ≥ 35 years had either a history of smoking and/or had been exposed to dust, gas or fumes in their workplace.¹ Following the completion of the survey, the data was weighted to reflect the latest ABS population estimates i.e. currently 11.4 million Australians are aged ≥ 35 years, therefore equating to 7.283 million being at risk.⁷

About lung disease:

- Please refer to separate fact sheet for more information on lung disease in Australia.
- **Link between lung disease and smoking:** cigarette smoking is the most important cause of lung diseases such as COPD.^{8,9} There is a close relationship between the amount of tobacco smoked and the rate of decline in forced expiratory flow in one second (FEV₁), although individuals vary greatly in susceptibility.⁸ Around half of all smokers develop some airflow limitation, and 15-20 percent will develop clinically significant disability.⁸ Smokers are also at risk of developing lung cancer, and cardiovascular disease.
- **Link between lung disease and exposure to harmful dust, gas or fumes:** occupational dust exposure plays a role in lung disease and may be responsible for up to 20-30 percent of COPD. This has long been recognised in underground miners, and biological dust has also been identified as a risk factor, particularly in women.¹⁰

About the research:

The research was conducted by Galaxy Research and commissioned by The Australian Lung Foundation in September 2009. Please refer to separate fact sheet for more information on the research, its findings and the methodology.

About the Lung Health Checklist:

The Lung Health Checklist allows people to understand their lung health and share the results with their healthcare provider if required. After completing the Lung Health Checklist, users receive a customised response providing advice on action to be taken for their lung health.

About Lung Health Awareness Month:

Lung Health Awareness Month aims to raise awareness of lung disease among Australians, promote the importance of lung health and motivate people with lung disease symptoms to seek diagnosis and treatment. Lung Health Awareness Month is a precursor to 2010 World Year of the Lung. Donations made to The Australian Lung Foundation during Lung Health Awareness Month will go toward hiring a specialist lung care nurse to provide medical advice and assistance via the toll free support hotline (1800 654 301).

About The Australian Lung Foundation:

The Australian Lung Foundation is the premier organisation for lung health in Australia, providing medical and support group representation nationwide. It was established in 1990 to reduce the significant and debilitating cost of lung disease and is the leading facilitator of research and professional development in lung disease. The Australian Lung Foundation offers a national network of patient support groups for people with lung conditions. Patients are supported with information via www.lungfoundation.com.au, a quarterly health education newsletter, telephone information and toll free support hotline (1800 654 301).

References

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7. Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Australian Demographic Statistics*. 31 March 2009
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