

Interstitial Lung Abnormalities as Incidental Findings on Lung CT

In a meta-analysis, these abnormalities were noted in 7% of computed tomography scans done for lung cancer screening.

The term “interstitial lung abnormalities” (ILAs) is used increasingly to describe certain incidental findings on lung computed tomography (CT). In a position paper published in 2020 on this topic, ILAs were defined as incidentally identified “non-dependent abnormalities, including ground-glass or reticular abnormalities, lung distortion, traction bronchiectasis, honeycombing, and non-emphysematous cysts ... involving at least 5% of a lung zone.”

To determine the prevalence of ILAs, researchers conducted this meta-analysis. Findings included the following:

- In 10 studies (with 31,000 participants) of lung cancer screening with low-dose CT, overall prevalence of ILAs was 7%.
- In 8 “general population” studies (with 57,000 participants), in which cohorts had routine CT scans for reasons other than lung cancer screening or detection of interstitial lung disease, overall prevalence of ILAs also was 7%.
- In 6 studies that reported mortality during median follow-up of 5 years, having ILAs was associated with significant excess mortality, with odds ratios ranging from 1.4 to 8.2.

COMMENT

I’m seeing ILAs mentioned more and more in radiology reports of CT scans done for lung cancer screening. Their cause and consequences often are unclear. Nevertheless, they should prompt a review of the patient’s medical history, with attention to respiratory symptoms and potential causes such as inhaled exposures, drugs with lung toxicity, occult systemic diseases with pulmonary manifestations, and conditions that might predispose the patient to recurrent infection (e.g., recurrent aspiration pneumonitis). In some cases, ILAs eventually progress to typical interstitial lung diseases.

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*Hatabu H et al. Interstitial lung abnormalities detected incidentally on CT: A position paper from the Fleischner Society. **Lancet Respir Med** 2020 Jul; 8:726. ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30168-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30168-5))*

*Grant-Orser A et al. Prevalence, risk factors, and outcomes of adult interstitial lung abnormalities: A systematic review and meta-analysis. **Am J Respir Crit Care Med** 2023 Sep 15; 208:695. (<https://doi.org/10.1164/rccm.202302-0271OC>)*

*Luo F et al. Adult interstitial lung abnormalities: The new frontier of pulmonary fibrosis. **Am J Respir Crit Care Med** 2023 Sep 15; 208:651. (<https://doi.org/10.1164/rccm.202307-1287ED>)*